

‘When the people are made the enemy’: Human  
Rights, Military Doctrine and the Path to Atrocity  
in Vietnam and El Salvador

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September 2010

## Abstract

The Vietnam and Salvadoran wars were marked by examples of some of the worst atrocities committed during the course of twentieth century conflict. The massacres at My Lai in Vietnam and El Mozote in El Salvador came to be regarded by many as the defining actions of those wars. These tragedies, however, were not isolated examples, and civilians in each war often bore the brunt of military operations designed to defeat the leftist insurgencies that had erupted in these countries. This thesis will examine why soldiers committed such war crimes in Vietnam and El Salvador.

Inextricably linked by the presence of the United States, the conflicts in Vietnam and El Salvador book-ended a period of intense division within American society, politics and the military. Intense debate over the direction of American foreign and military policy had resulted in shifting political tides over the decade between the two wars. This thesis will place the topic of war crimes within this context of a changing political scene in the United States.

In doing so, this thesis will break from more narrowly defined investigations of atrocities in Vietnam and El Salvador. It will reject the more common analyses of these conflicts that too often see them in isolation. Instead, the continuation of policies from one to the other will highlight the fact that American foreign and military policy did not simply end with one war and start again with the next.

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## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Alex Goodall, for the time and effort he has spent on my work this year. He guided me back into the world of academia and his assistance throughout the year was invaluable.

My friends, from St. Andrews, York, and home, were inspirational. I thank them so much for their encouragement. I could not have done it without them.

And finally, my endless thanks to my family. Their support means the world to me.

## Declaration

I, Andrew Stead, hereby declare that this thesis, for submission to the Department of History, York University, is entirely my own work. It significantly expands upon my undergraduate research on the My Lai massacre. Any external sources have been referenced accordingly. This thesis contains 37,490 words.

## Introduction

‘Atrocity – this close range murder of the innocent and helpless – is the most repulsive aspect of war, and that which resides within man and permits him to perform these acts is the most repulsive aspect of mankind.’<sup>1</sup> - Lieutenant Colonel

Dave Grossman

On 16 March 1968, in one of the most notorious incidents of the Vietnam War, soldiers from the U.S. Army’s Americal Division killed nearly five hundred Vietnamese civilians in the community of My Lai. It was a massacre that sent shock waves through American society when it became public knowledge in 1969, and led to serious questions about the state of the American military. The atrocity was an uncomfortable topic for the United States as a nation in subsequent years. It lingered in the American psyche for decades beyond the culmination of the war, though in what Kendrick Oliver has termed only a ‘fragile, intermittent, and partial’ state in the public’s memory.<sup>2</sup> It was one aspect of the Vietnam syndrome, a condition which had created ‘public uncertainty about America’s proper role in the world, partisan division over foreign policy, and institutional conflict between Congress and the executive branch.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Kendrick Oliver, ‘Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)rationalising the Massacre at My Lai’, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (August, 2003), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 8.

The Vietnam syndrome had been coined as a term by Ronald Reagan during his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in the build up to the 1980 presidential election. The Republican candidate saw America as suffering from needless guilt over its intervention in Vietnam, and felt the country had become hesitant about standing up to aggression throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> It was a direct riposte to President Carter's administration. Watergate, the misdeeds of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and fears over executive privilege had pushed Congress into seeking a more active role in determining U.S. foreign policy during the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Carter, moderate and reformist, had epitomised this new Congressional approach. His foreign policy had emphasised compromise and co-operation.<sup>6</sup> Reagan, however, demanded a new focus on military preparedness in order to deal with threats to American interests.<sup>7</sup>

It was in the midst of this national division that the United States committed itself to aiding the staunchly anti-communist military government of El Salvador. The United States had provided some military support to El Salvador since World War II.<sup>8</sup> However, the burgeoning threat of the leftist insurgency in El Salvador during Carter's presidency had increased the importance of the Central American country in American foreign policy. As the fragile stability in the country faded away towards the end of the 1970s, El Salvador received unprecedented attention from an

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 19 August 1980.

<sup>5</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, 24 June 1976.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 30 January 1980.

<sup>8</sup> 'Background Information on the Security Forces in El Salvador and U.S. Military Assistance', *Report*, 1 March 1980.

American administration that regarded the situation there as the most precarious in the region.<sup>9</sup> The final breakdown in El Salvador's internal stability occurred amidst the campaign fervour of the 1980 U.S. presidential election, and the tiny, impoverished Central American country became symbolic of the two conflicting approaches to American foreign policy offered by Carter and Reagan.

The outbreak of civil war in El Salvador, following the unification of various insurgent groups into the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and its subsequent offensive in January 1981, challenged the United States' Vietnam syndrome and foreign policy trajectory. Supporting one of the 'military monsters',<sup>10</sup> as Walter LaFeber termed Central American countries during the 1980s, forced America to once again contemplate the possibility of its soldiers fighting a communist insurgency in a Third World nation. Arguments over the necessity of intervention in El Salvador and the willingness to support an authoritarian, morally dubious government created echoes of the turmoil Vietnam had produced in American society, and commentators reflected fears of a similar intervention in newspapers across the country.<sup>11</sup>

The echo of Vietnam became more resonant when, on 10 December 1981, members of the Atlacatl Battalion of El Salvador's Armed Forces (ESAF) marched into El Mozote, a small community located in the mountains of Morazán, one of El Salvador's eastern departments. The following day, they executed seven hundred and

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<sup>9</sup> *Washington Post*, 14 September 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), p. 363.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: *New York Times*, 25 February 1982.

sixty seven men, women and children from the area. The massacre at El Mozote was an act of savage brutality, notable even in a civil war that is remembered for its severity and lack of humanity. Dismissed by the Reagan administration as leftist propaganda, the atrocity was only fully brought to light following Mark Danner's investigation into the incident, which culminated in his 1994 work, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. The spectre of My Lai had emerged in America's newest battle against communist guerrillas.

The intention of this study is to explore how this spectre emerged. It will ask why soldiers committed atrocities in Vietnam, and why Salvadoran troops committed similar war crimes in their own fight against communist insurgents a decade later. It was argued that El Salvador represented America's first counterinsurgency experience since Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> Counterinsurgency demands an emphasis on securing the population's loyalty and safety, according to one of its leading theorists, David Galula.<sup>13</sup> Such an objective was ignored by American forces in Vietnam, and then by ESAF during its own conflict against guerrillas. Instead, the American and Salvadoran forces engaged in conventional warfare, employing tactics and firepower on a scale more suited to any prospective battle against Soviet forces in Europe. This study will contend that this reliance on conventionality – tactics, strategy and doctrine – bore ultimate responsibility for the civilian lives lost in Vietnam and El Salvador.

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Siegel and Joy Hackel, 'El Salvador: Counterinsurgency Revisited', in Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *Low-Intensity Conflict: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practise* (Westport, Praeger, 2006), p. 4.



That civilian lives were lost in such brutal fashion in both wars, and that the U.S. was involved in both conflicts too, has led to accusations that American military policy directly increased human rights violations. Critics of U.S. policy during the 1970s and 1980s have argued that the U.S. bought off Latin American militaries, transforming them into local power bases that secured the interests of the U.S in the region and facilitated the internationalisation of state-sponsored violence.<sup>14</sup> This work will seek to offer some balance to this issue, proposing that, despite important American influence on ESAF, accusations of U.S. complicity in war crimes during El Salvador's civil war have often been exaggerated. It is certainly true that the U.S. provided Salvadoran forces with doctrine and firepower unsuitable for countering the communist insurgency. A failure to integrate counterinsurgency into its doctrine after Vietnam weakened the effectiveness of U.S. Army assistance to ESAF, leading to the creation and maintenance of an entirely conventional indigenous military in El Salvador.<sup>15</sup> However, stringent criticism of the American role in El Salvador often fails to take into account the importance of internal factors: neglecting the social, economic and political realities of contemporary El Salvador and its often violent history closes off an important avenue of understanding in relation to the actions of its armed forces against civilians during the civil war. Underestimating just how fractured the American military and diplomatic program in El Salvador was compounds this lack of understanding. Disagreements between the departments of Defense and State, U.S. Southern Command (SouthCom) and the Military Group (MilGroup) in El Salvador itself meant that American influence was often ineffectual

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<sup>14</sup> Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador and the Drug War* (Westport, Praeger, 1998), p. 155.

and suffered from a lack of direction. Thus, this study will emphasise the balance that must be maintained in assessing American influence in El Salvador.

Whether the result of American or Salvadoran factors, it was an application of conventional military doctrine that created soldiers capable of atrocity. Convention created a path to atrocity that the soldiers present at My Lai, El Mozote and other examples of war crimes in Vietnam and El Salvador journeyed along. This study will examine each stage of this path in order to highlight the various factors during a soldier's military career that would mould him into someone capable of killing civilians. Firstly, the nature of training will be examined, in order to assess the impact that a soldier's first contact with the military had on his future conduct. His instruction in the ways of the military will be considered: the tactics he was taught, the weapons he was trained in. Most importantly of all, the extent of human rights training will be examined in order to assess the level of significance that was attached to it by the U.S. Army and ESAF. Secondly, the conduct of operations will be discussed. The manner in which soldiers executed their missions in these conflicts will be examined in order to assess how their tactics affected civilians in those areas they operated in. The discussion will then move on to an analysis of the officer corps of the U.S. Army and its Salvadoran counterpart, and their role in the path to atrocity. The quality of commanding officers has a vital role to play in determining the actions of soldiers, and highlighting personal and institutional weaknesses in the leadership element will help to show how this contributed to the momentum towards atrocity. This thesis will conclude with an examination of the personal interaction between soldiers and civilians in Vietnam and El Salvador, asking why soldiers diminished the worth of civilian life to the point at which it became expendable.

In searching for the answer to this question, this thesis will fit into the larger picture of research into the conduct of war. The cornerstones of such analysis are the works of Richard Holmes and Joanna Bourke, who have devoted much time into the study of human behaviour in war.<sup>16</sup> Dave Grossman, as a former member of the military, has provided a closer examination of atrocity that gets to the heart of how men can behave so terribly in war.<sup>17</sup> Their studies of the human aspect of combat link in with the larger examinations of violence that political scientists like William Stanley offer.<sup>18</sup> Marginalising the political factors that affect the path to atrocity weakens an understanding of war crimes, and as such, larger examinations of politics, particularly foreign policy, are crucial. William LeoGrande, Walter LaFeber and Cynthia Arnson have all written extensively on the evolution of American policy with regards to Central America.<sup>19</sup> By placing this study's examination of a path to atrocity into this wider body of literature, it is hoped that a better understanding of the topic of war crimes in Vietnam and El Salvador will be achieved.

Tracing this path will show that soldiers who killed civilians in Vietnam and El Salvador did so because of a multitude of inter-related factors. There is no simple or easy explanation for their actions. Attempting to locate their behaviour within neat categories, as espoused by Mark Osiel,<sup>20</sup> is insufficient. Dismissing these men as

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, Cassell Military, 2004) and Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London, Granta Books, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See Grossman, *On Killing*.

<sup>18</sup> See William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> See LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, and Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993* (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Mark J. Osiel, 'Obeying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline, and the Law of War', *California Law Review*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (October, 1998), p. 1029.

‘evil’ is simplistic. Instead, only a thorough investigation of their environment, and the placement of their actions within the larger context of their times, can offer a suitable attempt at seeking explanations for their shocking behaviour. Grossman argued that ‘atrocities have always been part of war, and in order to understand war, we must understand atrocities.’<sup>21</sup> Reversing this, and understanding Vietnam and El Salvador first – their conduct, their context, and their protagonists – is the only way to understand the terrible atrocities that were perpetrated during these wars. Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore, who led American troops at the battle of Ia Drang in November 1965, argued that ‘none of us had joined the Army to hurt children and frighten peaceful farm families.’<sup>22</sup> It is the intention of this study to show why, unfortunately, some of Moore’s colleagues in Vietnam, and counterparts in El Salvador, behaved in exactly this manner.

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<sup>21</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* (London, Corgi Books, 2002), p. 403.

## Chapter 1: Conventional Atrocity

‘The United States entered the Vietnam War with a doctrine well suited to fighting conventional war in Europe, but worse than useless for the counterinsurgency it was about to combat.’<sup>23</sup> – John A. Nagl.

With the exception of the introduction of strategic bombing, the U.S. Army’s philosophy towards conducting combat had changed little from the Civil War through to Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> General William Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) was particularly enamoured of the similarities between Vietnam and the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> With the most senior military commander in Vietnam assessing the conflict in this manner, it is unsurprising that the Army continued with this default mode of combat.<sup>26</sup> These historical traditions and values were reinforced by the Army’s capabilities and organisational structure. Firepower and mobility were two of the Army’s strongest assets, and allowed for the maximisation of enemy casualties whilst minimising American combat injuries and deaths. These fed what Krepinevich termed ‘counterinsurgency American-style’, and in Vietnam it became the *modus operandi* of the Army.<sup>27</sup> It relegated pacification to a secondary concern behind the concept of attrition, pressuring troops to focus on

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<sup>23</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 167.

<sup>26</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Krepinevich, *Army*, p. 214.

body counts. Robert Thompson, an experienced British counterinsurgency expert who had served in Malaya, regarded this strategy as a product of specifically American military traits: impatience, impulsiveness, aggression, and materialism. He noted that conventional, attrition-based warfare had a specific appeal to the Army because it played into these notions.<sup>28</sup> Given that firepower and brashness were decisive features of the Army in Vietnam,<sup>29</sup> Thompson's assessment was not without merit.

An emphasis on attrition created pressure on soldiers that minimised their concern for civilians. Philip Caputo remarked that by 1967, U.S. Army forces in Vietnam were 'going to kill people for a few cans of beer and the time to drink it.'<sup>30</sup> For the members of Tiger Force, who killed a number of civilians during the course of their operations, the body count was the primary determinant of success, not the security of a village, nor even the conventional 'taking' of the target.<sup>31</sup> Those at My Lai were responding to the exhortations of their commanding officer to conduct more aggressive combat operations in order to show a quantifiable measure of success for their time in the province of Quang Ngai.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Neil Sheehan recalled an exchange with Westmoreland during which, upon being quizzed about the levels of civilians being killed in artillery bombardments, the general replied: 'yes Neil, it is a

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 125.

<sup>29</sup> 'Interview with Bill Paris', 27 May 2003, Bill Paris Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

<sup>30</sup> Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 294.

<sup>31</sup> *Toledo Blade*, 19 October 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York, Viking, 1992), p. 94.

problem, but it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it?'<sup>33</sup> As well as being a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the war, this attitude to the conduct of the conflict would filter down to subordinate commands.

Westmoreland was instrumental in determining the course of the American military strategy in Vietnam, and he was responsible for downgrading the counterinsurgency element of the conflict in favour of maximising the effort U.S. forces went to in seeking the destruction of enemy forces. This was particularly noticeable in his rejection of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons (CAP). Despite being deployed in I Corps - the area of South Vietnam where a conventional NVA invasion would most likely occur - the Marines had opted for an unconventional strategy that aimed to ensure the population's safety. The Marines inserted rifle squads into individual villages, and each small group of soldiers would live in a specific community for extended periods of time. Regular Marine battalions would then alternate between the more conventional patrolling strategy and civic programs.

The CAP program was hailed as a success by many observers, who noted the positive affect it had on morale for the Marines and the improved safety of Vietnamese villages.<sup>34</sup> Westmoreland, though agreeable to the principle of the program, rejected an expansion of the CAP strategy and terminated any attempt to place greater emphasis on it.<sup>35</sup> In rebuffing the Marines' counterinsurgency program Westmoreland secured the continuation of the Army's conventional doctrine. He

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<sup>33</sup> Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (London, Picador, 1990), p. 621.

<sup>34</sup> See Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 138 and Krepinevich, *Army*, p. 174.

<sup>35</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 158.

also downplayed the March 1966 Program for the Pacification and Long Term Development of South Vietnam report. This analysis of the American effort in Vietnam, overseen by Westmoreland's successor as COMUSMACV, General Creighton Abrams, rejected the entirety of the American strategy in Vietnam up to that point.<sup>36</sup> Westmoreland's conscious decision to ignore its recommendations that the U.S. adopt a counterinsurgency policy and terminate its current strategy of conventional warfare was symptomatic of the grip that regular warfare had on the philosophical mindset of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. Westmoreland was replaced as COMUSMACV in June 1968, but Abrams could not secure victory either. The U.S. withdrew from South Vietnam in 1975 amidst chaotic scenes on the roof of the American embassy as people frantically attempted to clamber aboard the final departing U.S. helicopters.<sup>37</sup>

The prevailing point of view within the Army in the aftermath of Vietnam was one of utter bewilderment that the world's best equipped, most expensively assembled fighting force had to withdraw from a war against a native insurgency. The war in Vietnam had followed great success in Europe during two world wars, and to a lesser extent, military achievements in Korea. For many in the U.S. Army, and indeed across America as a nation, the solution was to turn inwards, to repress the wounds of the immediate past and to focus on the future.

The future for the U.S. Army was a return to conventional war, though 'return' is perhaps a slightly ironic term for what in reality was a re-doubling of the emphasis

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, April 30 1975.



on conventional warfare as the Army's *modus operandi*. Labouring under the misconception that its forces had engaged in too little conventional fighting during Vietnam, the post-war Army set about educating its troops in the conduct of operations that were more to the Army's liking. By the end of the decade, the Command and General Staff College had cut the 'Low Intensity Conflict' (LIC) course on its syllabus from forty hours to a mere nine.<sup>38</sup> Under the leadership of General William DePuy, who had been Westmoreland's operations officer during Vietnam, and had commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, Army manuals purged the very mention of counterinsurgency: the tenets of Army operations for the post-Vietnam era were set out in Field Manual 100-5 Operations, published in 1976, and the instructions within the document failed to mention counterinsurgency at all.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the manual marked the pinnacle of attrition and convention as the cornerstones of Army doctrine.<sup>40</sup>

Richard Duncan Downie, in his thorough and scientific study of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, El Salvador and the drug wars in the Andean mountain range, has termed this period in the 1970s as the Army's 'avoidance phase'.<sup>41</sup> It is not a surprising analysis, when one considers the neglect of counterinsurgency during this period combined with the advocacy of renewed focus on conventional warfare employed as a defence against Soviet offensives in Europe. Damaged by the disastrous outcome of Vietnam, with accusations of incompetent leadership, war crimes and cover-ups,

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<sup>38</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 206.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> Dennis Stewart Driggers, 'The United States Army's Long March from Saigon to Baghdad: The Development of War-Fighting Doctrine in the Post-Vietnam Era' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 68.

plus a series of scandals involving Post Exchanges and academy exam papers, the Army suffered crises of confidence, adaptation and conscience.<sup>42</sup>

Its solution was to ignore Vietnam, and to refocus on what it regarded as its role in the Cold War – a conventional force designed to maintain the peace in Europe and prevent a Soviet offensive through the Fulda Gap.<sup>43</sup> Influential senior officers spurred this effort, with Army Generals William E. DePuy and Donn A. Starry providing much of the impetus through their role as the first two commanders of the U.S. Army's new Training and Doctrine Command. They were aided in their efforts by a variety of dynamics that provided justification and a rationale for the Army's conventional outlook. The Yom Kippur War in October 1973 provided a convenient excuse for the Army's post-Vietnam philosophy, with its infantry-backed armour combat being hailed as the model of future warfare by DePuy; he would utilise the Yom Kippur War in his persuasion of other Army officers that the tank was the Army's new primary method of offense.<sup>44</sup>

DePuy, who was a firm advocate of the Army's approach to Vietnam – he had persuaded Westmoreland that the Marine's CAP program was ineffective and should be terminated – was one of a number of senior Army officers who were involved in the formulation of doctrine during the 1970s.<sup>45</sup> These officers implemented a

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Gabriel, *To Serve with Honor: A Treatise on Military Ethics and the Way of the Soldier* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Saul Bronfeld, 'Fighting Outnumbered: The Impact of the Yom Kippur War on the U.S. Army', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (April, 2007), p. 496.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 475.

<sup>45</sup> Conrad C. Crane, *Avoiding Vietnam: the U.S. Army's Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia* (Carlisle, Combat Studies Institute, 2002), p. 4.

deliberate, and counter-productive ‘No More Vietnams’ approach, shifting attention away from counterinsurgency and disassembling the Army’s ability to engage in Third World conflict.<sup>46</sup> It is little wonder that, assessing the Salvadoran civil war in 1986, Colonel John D. Waghelstein bemoaned a complete lack of training in counterinsurgency for American soldiers, and only a marginal level of training for officers, in the years prior to the advisory effort there.<sup>47</sup>

This conventional philosophy was unsurprising, given that when the U.S. Army reluctantly examined its performance in Vietnam, it took to heart the assessment of one particular officer, Colonel Harry Summers. Summers’ 1982 work, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, was regarded as the logical explanation for the Army’s failings in Vietnam, and was considered by many in the upper echelons of the Army during the 1970s and early 1980s to be the only assessment of Vietnam that merited serious consideration.<sup>48</sup> Within its pages, *On Strategy* paints a picture of an American military force that performed superbly in Vietnam: one that was ‘unbeatable’ on the battlefield.<sup>49</sup> In addition to affirming the U.S. military’s prowess, Summers assuaged the doubts of the 1970s. Rejecting the argument that Vietnam was a revolutionary conflict, he emphasised the point that counterinsurgency was misguided and that when the U.S. had defeated guerrilla forces during the war, it had been through conventional arms and strategies.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Downie, *Learning From Conflict*, p. 70.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein in Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk (eds.), *El Salvador at War* (Washington, DC., National Defense University Press, 1988), p. 404.

<sup>48</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 206.

<sup>49</sup> Col. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Presidio Press, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 90.

The Army's conscious decision to marginalise counterinsurgency, even to excise the term from its lexicon, in the aftermath of Vietnam resulted in an ever greater misunderstanding of the principles and techniques of genuine counterinsurgency in the years immediately preceding the Salvadoran civil war. And just as conventionality produced atrocity in Vietnam, so too would an emphasis on conventional arms and tactics in El Salvador produce an environment in which the safety of civilians was not adequately ensured.

In November 1981, after a request by Salvadoran President José Napoleón Duarte for senior American military involvement, U.S. Army General Fred Woerner submitted a report to the United States and Salvadoran governments entitled the *Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team*.<sup>51</sup> Alongside seven other members of the team, and after eight weeks of analysis and cooperation with Salvadoran officers, Woerner presented his findings in a document that was the most thorough, detailed examination of the Salvadoran military ever conducted.<sup>52</sup> The Woerner Report highlighted rampant deficiencies in ESAF and recommended that U.S. assistance be devoted to creating a national strategy for 'Strategic Victory' - to 'destroy the insurgent will and capability to fight; and defend the national territory from internal and external aggression.'<sup>53</sup> As the American government's first real examination of its ally, Woerner examined a litany of complaints concerning the Salvadoran approach to the civil war that had erupted the previous year, including

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with José Napoleón Duarte, *El Salvador at War*, p. 112.

<sup>52</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 137.

<sup>53</sup> *Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assessment Team (Woerner Report)*, p. 185.

many of the failures which had led to the events at El Mozote, at the Sumpul and Lempa Rivers, and at numerous other instances of murder and massacre. However, rather than turning toward counterinsurgency analyses, Woerner commended the traditionalist ideas of Karl von Clausewitz and Summers' *On Strategy* as foundations for his 'new' approach.<sup>54</sup> His admiration for the two reflected the conventional approach to warfare which had dominated the Army's philosophy in Vietnam, lingered in its aftermath, and continued during El Salvador.

Though observers in the press, academia and the military routinely described El Salvador as a counterinsurgency effort, and made direct comparisons with Vietnam,<sup>55</sup> in reality the doctrine applied by the U.S. was based around Woerner's appreciation of convention. Though counterinsurgency had gained more adherents and a new name - Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) - during the Reagan administration, it was not accepted within the U.S. Army as a primary method of waging war. Woerner, like many within the military, believed convention, rather than counterinsurgency, would win the day in El Salvador.

The traditions of El Salvador's military compounded the problem of an excessive focus on conventionality. For much of the twentieth century, ESAF had countered opposition through a brutal, indiscriminate policy of repression that was designed to destroy opposition, rather than incorporate reforms into the Salvadoran system.<sup>56</sup> In particular the 1932 *Matanza*, in which the military government of General

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<sup>54</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 203.

<sup>55</sup> *Washington Post*, 11 March 1983.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 8.

Maximiliano Hernández Martínez killed around ten thousand *campesino* and Indian civilians out of retribution for their failed uprising, was taken as a marker for how to successfully deal with an insurgency.<sup>57</sup>

Once the rebellion had petered out, the armed forces moved into those areas affected by trouble and proceeded to conduct large scale massacres as a means of cleansing infected areas: the military cordoned off any chance of escape for villagers before opening fire on civilians caught in the middle. According to Gregorio Bustamente Maceo's account of the military's actions in the town of Juayúa,

‘they ordered all of the honourable men who were not communists to present themselves at the Municipal building, to give them safe conduct, and when the plaza was replete with men, women and children they blocked the streets leading out of the plaza and machine gunned the innocent multitude, not even the poor dogs who always faithfully follow their Indian masters escaped.’<sup>58</sup>

This approach was reminiscent of that used at El Mozote. After being assured of their safety by the military, the inhabitants of El Mozote and the surrounding area congregated in the village as a means of securing themselves from the sweep taking place through Morazán by the Atlacatl Battalion.<sup>59</sup> Upon entering the area, the Atlacatl sealed off the community and proceeded to massacre those trapped within.

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<sup>57</sup> Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, ‘The Culture and Politics of State Terror and Repression in El Salvador’ in Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez (eds.), *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 92.

<sup>58</sup> Michael McClintock, *The American Connection Volume One: State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador* (London, Zed Books, 1985), p. 113.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York, Vintage Books 1994), p. 16.

The parallels lend credence to Lauria-Santiago's argument that the *Matanza* was part of the ideology of the repressive agencies during the civil war later in the century.<sup>60</sup>

With the *Matanza* offering guidance for combat commanders in the civil war, El Salvador's actions in the 1969 Soccer War with Honduras also helped decide the trajectory of strategy in the subsequent civil conflict.<sup>61</sup> Though ESAF was not countering guerrillas during the Soccer War, it was the most recent large-scale combat effort they had been involved in, and as such had a large impact on the combat experience of unit commanders. This reinforced the conventional military philosophy within ESAF.<sup>62</sup> Its units had been trained and equipped for a conventional war with Honduras, and had ignored the doctrine of counterinsurgency.<sup>63</sup> U.S. advisors found it difficult to counter the ethos of deploying extreme violence as a means to an end. Some officials recognised these processes, with Colonel Waghelstein particularly astute in assessing the damaging impact the *Matanza* and its aftermath had on Salvadoran society.<sup>64</sup> However, such analysis failed to have any significant impact in deterring ESAF from its strategies.

ESAF was also conscious of a perceived threat from Nicaragua, which had recently undergone tremendous political upheaval with the triumph of the leftist *Sandinista* regime. There was a very real fear within the military, particularly the officer corps, that the nation was facing a desperate situation, and if the guerrillas and leftists

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<sup>60</sup> Lauria-Santiago, 'Culture and Politics', p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 278.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Colonel René Emilio Ponce, *El Salvador at War*, p. 293.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Colonel Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez, *El Salvador at War*, p. 60.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 8.

succeeded – just as they had done in Nicaragua – then the military as an institution would fail.<sup>65</sup> Ensuring the survival of the military became a priority.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, the military tended to approve of any measures which would damage the chances of the left-wing gaining strength, whether militarily or in terms of popular support. After the eruption of violence following the nationwide uprising by the FMLN during its final offensive, ESAF's fears became more acute. Their response was to begin arresting, or simply killing, anyone with a genuine, perceived, or invented connection to leftist forces.<sup>67</sup> Without the necessary commitment to reform or civilian security, this was not a counterinsurgency policy, but simply brutal, conventional repression.

Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl argued that conventional armies are not effective forces for countering insurgencies, given their emphasis on offensive action in place of co-ordinated political, economic and social programs.<sup>68</sup> As we have seen in this chapter, this was clearly evident in Vietnam and El Salvador. The U.S. Army relegated the importance of pacification for a great deal of the war in Vietnam, instead devoting itself to convention.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, despite a number of high profile studies into the failures of Vietnam, conventional military doctrine remained the favoured approach for the U.S. Army.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the Army's preferred solution to the Salvadoran insurgency was to focus on a

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<sup>65</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, *El Salvador at War*, p. 217.

<sup>67</sup> *Washington Post*, 1 July 1980.

<sup>68</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. ix.

<sup>69</sup> Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 52.

<sup>70</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 73.



philosophy which differed little from the disastrous strategy of Vietnam. El Salvador's military had a predilection for convention that pre-dated American assistance, and this was reinforced by the surge of U.S. aid in the 1970s and 1980s. Soldiers in both forces were inadequately prepared for engaging in counterinsurgency environments, and civilians were to pay the price for this.

## Chapter 2: Training to Murder

‘To understand what happens to the GI among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America. You must understand Fort Lewis, Washington. You must understand a thing called basic training.’<sup>71</sup> – Tim O’Brien.

Understanding the atrocities of Vietnam and El Salvador does not begin in My Lai or El Mozote. Those soldiers who committed murder and massacre in these wars took a long path to their brutality. It was a journey that began upon their entry into the military, and continued through their initial stage of military life: training. Richard Holmes has commented on the disproportionate impact of training upon men in the armed forces. He argued that, given training is a recruit’s initial contact with the military’s way of life, with all of its policies, rituals and idiosyncrasies, the relative level of influence on the recruit is much greater than at the further stages of his military career.<sup>72</sup> Grossman, himself a former member of the United States military, asked,

‘Lives there a veteran who cannot close his eyes and vividly visualize his drill sergeant? Over the years a hundred bosses, teachers, professors, instructors, sergeants, and officers have directed various aspects of my life, but none has had the impact that Drill Sergeant G. had on that cold morning in 1974.’<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Tim O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (London, Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 44.

<sup>73</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 318.

Thus, training is a crucial factor to examine when asking questions about the behaviour of soldiers in Vietnam and El Salvador. Strangely, as Holmes has also noted, the study of training is often overshadowed by the history of great battles, tactics and strategy. He points out that in neglecting the soldier's life before he even sets foot upon a battlefield, fundamental information is missed which can cast illumination on why a man acts as he does under the stresses and strains of the horrors of war.<sup>74</sup> Seeking answers on the nature of training for the soldiers of Vietnam and El Salvador can help to more accurately understand how some would later turn their weapons on innocent civilians.

History teaches us many lessons about the capacity of ordinary men and women to inflict humiliating defeats upon professional armed forces, but there is no denying that the most successful armies sustained their victories on the back of rigorous, effective training programs. At the core is the simple notion that training's purpose is to transform a member of civilian society into a soldier – a functioning, effective member of the military.<sup>75</sup> However, many commentators sharply rebuked the perpetrators of My Lai for failing to discharge their duty properly, and denounced Lt. William Calley, who commanded Charlie Company that day, as failing to do his job as a soldier and a leader.<sup>76</sup> In El Salvador, some members its armed forces belatedly

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<sup>74</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 36.

<sup>75</sup> Bourke, *An Intimate History*, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> 'Interview with Gary L. Noller', 16 August 2005, Gary L. Noller Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (16/4/2010).

admitted responsibility for ineffectively protecting the population.<sup>77</sup> This chapter will therefore seek to understand what impact training had upon soldiers in these wars. The training of soldiers for Vietnam will be analysed, before a discussion of the U.S. role in training ESAF. The chapter will conclude by examining ESAF's own training policies. In doing so, this section will ask if a soldier's training created failures in ethics, or whether troops carried out operations in accordance with their training.

American military training during the Vietnam War could be staggering in its application of violence towards recruits. One recruit, as told in Mark Baker's excellent collection of first-hand, though anonymous, accounts from Vietnam, recalled that,

'It was really funny, a take-off from Gomer Pyle. The guy within arm's reach of the Marine was laughing just like everybody else. Smokey Bear whipped around and smacked him right in the face, knocked him halfway through the window. His head bounced off the luggage rack and he reeled back out in the aisle.'<sup>78</sup>

Anonymity does not lend itself to corroboration. However, when examining other accounts of Marine Corps training, one finds similar examples that demonstrate the brutality of that particular service's training regime. Scott Dawson, a member of the Marines during Vietnam, stated that his Drill Instructor struck him in the solar plexus, along with several of his comrades, in retribution for not having had to do

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Colonel René Emilio Ponce, *El Salvador at War*, p. 215.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (London, Abacus, 1987), p. 13.

this previously during training.<sup>79</sup> Thus, violence was not only applied as punishment for infractions, but was also applied in examples of spotless behaviour: aggression was omnipresent.

The U.S. Army training regime does not seem to have exhibited this brutality to the same extent as the Marine Corps. There does not appear to have been the same extremism as was displayed at Parris Island, the Marine Corps' infamous training facility in South Carolina. Accounts of violence inflicted upon Army recruits are not to be found in the documentary evidence, or in the numerous oral histories that were examined for this study. This is not to say that such incidents did not occur, but the lack of such evidence suggests that the U.S. Army may have demonstrated more restraint towards its men.

However, the Army did display a more insidious, and more dangerous, approach to sanctioning violence. As one soldier put it, 'the people in the Army were not intellectuals',<sup>80</sup> and the approach in training was to subject recruits to the mantra that the toughest, largest and most dominating element was superior. Those who could enforce discipline through sheer physical presence, as well as the ability to translate such presence into force when required, were placed in charge of units from an early stage.<sup>81</sup> It meant that from their initial stages in the Army, soldiers were learning that force was the primary means of dealing with any situation. In the complex world of the Vietnamese countryside, where completing a successful counterinsurgency

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<sup>79</sup> 'Interview with Robert Scott Dawson', 14 September 2001, Robert Scott Dawson Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (19/4/2010).

<sup>80</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 15.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

mission was based upon effectively navigating shifting loyalties, complicated local history and dynamic local relations, this approach was unworkable – it lent itself to blasting past any issue with as much force as possible.

This ethos was reinforced by the Army's massive array of conventional weapons systems. Training was designed to facilitate the effective deployment of traditional weaponry, often in excessive quantities. The vast majority of training was devoted to teaching soldiers how to kill the enemy using every weapon at the disposal of the Army. The most basic level of weapons training was hand-to-hand combat, and bayonet training was particularly intense. Tim O'Brien recalled that 'again and again we thrust into mid-air imagined bellies, sometimes towards throats', whilst all the time bellowing that 'Drill Sergeant, the spirit of the bayonet is to kill! To kill!'<sup>82</sup> Timothy Vail remembered that 'we had bayonet training, big on bayonet training.'<sup>83</sup> Given the time spent on this weapon in training, the heightened sense of aggression it facilitated was incredibly powerful.

The bayonet may have offered some advantages in the confined, nervy and often close-quarters combat of the Vietnamese jungles. However, it does not seem that the Army utilised this weapon after training, with Vail adding that he never had a bayonet in Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> No other testimony studied mentions the bayonet in combat in Vietnam either. Its primary importance for the Army was in creating a hyper-aggressive state of mind in troops. It did this much more effectively than rifle

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<sup>82</sup> O'Brien, *If I Die*, p. 51.

<sup>83</sup> 'Interview With Timothy Vail', 6 October 2005, Timothy P. Vail Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

marksmanship and mortar training, because those kinds of weapons reflected a mid-level range of engagement, replete with ducking, covering and cowering, whereas bayonets required aggression and face-to-face interaction with the enemy.<sup>85</sup> In teaching this skill relentlessly to new recruits, the Army fostered a much more aggressive attitude in its troops. It sent them to Vietnam with a heightened capacity for close-quarters bloodshed, and taught them that such aggression was not only acceptable, it was required and demanded.

The rifle, of course, occupied a great deal of a recruit's time. The M-16 was the standard weapon for Army troops in Vietnam, and though soldiers would be expected to learn how to handle other weapons, the M-16 was the first weapon encountered, and the weapon most used in combat. Training to use a rifle involved the standard process of range firing, devised to teach accuracy and general rifle marksmanship. However, the Army also employed teaching aids that promoted a careless and indiscriminate use of the rifle, albeit with the tactical justification of better combat effectiveness. One such teaching aid was known as the 'Quick-Kill Program', and was taught using small metal discs that were suddenly thrown out into the air, requiring the recruit to score a hit with their weapon. Another was the use of pop-up targets, which required split-second firing reaction. The Army felt that in a combat environment in which an enemy could appear for as little as two seconds at a time, more dependable accuracy was required from its troops.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Bourke, *An Intimate History*, p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 15 January 1968.

Some soldiers approved of this element of the training. Gary Franklin, a member of the Americal Division and deployed to Vietnam in June 1968, recalled that at Fort Polk, where he underwent Advanced Infantry Training, the Army's rapid fire training course 'was a big help.'<sup>87</sup> However, an unfortunate consequence was that soldiers were being taught to fire off a round at a momentary glimpse of a possible target, without carefully deciding upon its nature. With their decision-making processes manipulated by training, it was unsurprising that out in Vietnam, in the jungles and hamlets, in the rice paddies and deltas, careful acquisition and engagement of targets was lacking. Soldiers were being taught to fire first, and ask questions later.

Such questions should have been based around the pertinent questions of who constituted legitimate targets in a war like Vietnam, and how was the huge quantity of conventional firepower available to U.S. Army soldiers to be effectively and discriminately employed against the NVA and VC. These topics came under the subject of human rights training, and could have offered an effective counterbalance to the emphasis on force maintained elsewhere throughout training. In the twentieth-century, following the adoption of legally binding international legislation, particularly the Hague and Geneva Conventions, human rights training became more relevant to militaries that now had to enforce the regulations upon their soldiers. Did the U.S. Army offer its soldiers sufficient training in these policies?

The U.S Army operated with the obligation to uphold two aspects of the law of war.

The first of these was the written law of war. As a signatory nation of the Geneva

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<sup>87</sup> 'Interview with Gary Franklin', 1 November 2001, Gary Franklin Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).



Conventions,<sup>88</sup> the United States was bound by law to operate within the constraints of these legally defined and specifically worded human rights initiatives. The second form of military law was known as the unwritten, or customary, law of war. This concept of combat legislation was not explicitly documented. However the Peers Report, General William Peers' final report on the investigation into the My Lai massacre and its subsequent cover-up, noted that the customary law of war was, at the time of Vietnam, 'well defined by recognised authorities on international law and is firmly established by the custom and usage of civilised nations.'<sup>89</sup>

The U.S. Army understood that the Vietnam War was a conflict in which both forms of the law of war were to be adhered to.<sup>90</sup> The documentary evidence points to the fact that the upper echelons of the Army during the Vietnam War were committed to complying with international human rights treaties. The sheer number and scope of Army regulations that a soldier was required to comply with was testament to this. The U.S. Army's Field Manual (FM) 27-10 'The Law of Land Warfare' contained the fundamental regulations concerning the behaviour of soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>91</sup>

The Army directed that training was to be conducted at a level such that 'the individual soldier understands his specific duties and obligations in the pursuit of the

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<sup>88</sup> 'Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949', <<http://www.icrc.org/IHL.NSF/WebSign?ReadForm&id=375&ps=P>> (28/1/2010).

<sup>89</sup> *Report of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident – Volume 1, The Report of the Investigation (Peers Report)*, p. 9-1.

<sup>90</sup> *Peers Report*, p. 9-2.

<sup>91</sup> 'FM 27-10, Department of the Army Field Manual: The Law of Land Warfare', <[http://www.aschq.army.mil/supportingdocs/Fm27\\_10.pdf](http://www.aschq.army.mil/supportingdocs/Fm27_10.pdf)> (13/9/2010).

US national policy.’<sup>92</sup> Drill instructors were obligated under Army Regulation (AR) 350-216 to provide training that was ‘adequate to insure that all members of their commands understand the principles and provisions of the Geneva Conventions.’<sup>93</sup> There was clearly a legal obligation to make an effort to teach soldiers about human rights.

However, a legal obligation, and the authority of an order from the upper echelons of the chain of command, did not necessarily mean training was particularly effective or prolonged in the matter of human rights. During the initial stages of a soldier’s military service, the Army allocated only one hour to the study of human rights and conduct in the field with regards to the law of war. This one hour of training was based upon Army Subject Schedule 21-18, and as such was to be uniformly applied across all units, at all training installations. It was to be conducted by a trained legal officer, and a note of completion was required on a serviceman’s personnel record.<sup>94</sup> Despite good intentions, a single hour out of a three hundred and fifty two hour basic training program was simply insufficient for the purposes of understanding the Geneva Conventions. The one hour of training was overwhelmed by the devotion to tradition and convention within the Army; the basic training program allocated eighty three hours for rifle marksmanship, with drill and ceremony instruction allocated forty hours.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Peers Report*, p. 9-4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9-4.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9-5.

<sup>95</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 15 January 1968.

Furthermore, the attitude towards Geneva Conventions training was liable to be tainted by the Army's inclination towards seeking the destruction of enemy forces, rather than safeguarding the civilian population. Grossman recounted that,

‘At Fort Benning I too had heard the “Geneva Convention and white phosphorous on equipment line” during the artillery pitch in Office Candidate School, the Infantry Officer Basic Course, Ranger school, and the Infantry Mortar Platoon Officer's Course. The treatment of POW's had been addressed by an instructor at Ranger school, and he clearly communicated his personal belief that in a raid or ambush, a patrol could not be expected to take POW's. I had noted that most of the outstanding young soldiers coming to us from the Ranger Battalion shared this Ranger school belief.’<sup>96</sup>

The ‘Geneva Convention and white phosphorous line’ refers to comments made by soldiers, in Grossman's presence, advocating the firing of the lethal explosive chemical at an enemy's equipment rather than the enemy himself – the rationale being that deploying white phosphorous against a human being was a breach of the Geneva Conventions, whilst launching weapons at inanimate objects was not. Whilst Grossman has a courageous and admirable intolerance for this kind of thinking in the military – a standpoint that comes across strongly in his work – it is clear that some elements of the U.S. Army's instructor corps were willing to diminish the rules of land warfare in the presence of recruits. Indeed, the soldiers who carried out the My Lai massacre recalled a half-hearted approach in their human rights training, with

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<sup>96</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 204.

Herbert L. Carter later stating that instructors laughed at the prospect of fighting a humane, ethical war.<sup>97</sup>

It may have been that the Army resented having external ethics imposed upon it; that for men who are accustomed to a way of doing things, as defined by many decades of tradition and experience, it was hard to stomach having to satisfy the politically-correct decrees of politicians who had to maintain diplomatic relations with other nations, and for whom ignoring international law would present difficult and embarrassing situations. Indeed, the superintendent of West Point – the United States Military Academy – declared in 1979, even after the horrors and brutality of Vietnam had come to light, that

‘Military service does require a certain basic pattern of commitment in ethical beliefs. But... it is not possible to prescribe in advance and in detail for every situation. And unthinking acceptance of a set of ethics prefabricated by others seems to us to have little promise for American military officers.’<sup>98</sup>

It is highly ironic that the commanding officer of West Point viewed automatic acceptance of ideas with some suspicion, when the Army’s entire ethos during training for Vietnam was one of instilling soldiers with the belief that orders were to be executed without question, discussion or compromise. It is of course entirely right that the Army train men to act decisively: after all, no army would be successful if troops procrastinated upon being given commands. However, what is relevant to war

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<sup>97</sup> Herbert L. Carter, ‘Testimony to Peers Commission, 1970’ in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (eds.), *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Bedford Books, 1998), p. 42.

<sup>98</sup> Gabriel, *To Serve with Honor*, p. 129.

crimes in Vietnam is that in a number of cases, soldiers who took part recalled that upon being given an order – irrespective of what that order constituted, or who gave it – they felt obliged to carry it out. Calley, testifying at his defence, remarked that ‘all orders were to be assumed legal, that the soldier's job was to carry out any order given him to the best of his ability.’<sup>99</sup>

Why did they feel this way? It has already been noted that there was no alternative notion of acceptable behaviour within the Army, which rigorously drilled this ethos into soldiers during training. Human rights training was basic and perfunctory, and lost within endless hours of aggressive training. Given this, a definite set of Army ethics – a well defined, oral and written code of conduct perhaps – may well have proved to be an effective barrier against the forces of atrocity in the field, when the pressure to kill was overwhelming, particularly if given an order by a superior officer. Richard Gabriel has written extensively on this issue, and his *To Serve with Honor* is a lucid, thought-provoking appeal for the U.S. Army to adopt a set of ethics that will provide its soldiers with the necessary framework upon which they can base decisions in the field. During Vietnam and over the following decade, the Army had no formal, specific set of ethics. Soldiers took the oath of commission, repeated the mantra of ‘Duty, Honour, and Country’, and learnt of the Code of Conduct - a code which only emphasised that soldiers, if captured and held as prisoners of war, were to act in a manner befitting the Army. In Gabriel’s opinion, ‘all three are inadequate to the task of inculcating and reinforcing a special sense of ethical responsibility required of the soldier.’<sup>100</sup> Gabriel goes on to argue that ‘without a code of ethics we

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<sup>99</sup> ‘Lt. William Calley, Testimony for the Defense’, <[http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/myl\\_Calltest.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/myl_Calltest.html)> (13/9/2010).

<sup>100</sup> Gabriel, *To Serve*, p. 71.

may still fight, but we will fight as hollow men uncertain of our country, uncertain of our profession, but, most of all, uncertain of ourselves and our humanity in a world already grown too inhuman.’<sup>101</sup> The training of American soldiers for Vietnam offered little assistance in fighting this uncertainty.

The second reason as to why soldiers in Vietnam found it impossible to deny the authority of an order to kill, regardless of the target, was that their training was devised in such a way as to make automatic acceptance of a command the norm. As previously noted, decisive action can be helpful in a combat zone. Yet this cornerstone of Army life was also a contributing factor to the propensity for massacre. Unwitting obedience is necessary for war crimes, but it works in conjunction with other powerful agencies that diminish a soldier’s resistance to atrocity, as will be discussed throughout this study. The training of soldiers for Vietnam was particularly rigorous with regards to enforcing obedience. Philip Caputo recalled how training emphasised, indeed mandated, that orders were to be executed ‘instantly and in unison, without thinking.’<sup>102</sup>

The final reason, and one which created pressure on soldiers to commit to orders immediately and without question, was that the very concept of illegal orders was at best vaguely defined by the Army. In fact, the Peers Report was keen to stress that the very term ‘Illegal Order’ was not to be found anywhere in the dictionary of Army phrases and terms, nor was it discussed at any great length in Army regulations, with

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

<sup>102</sup> Caputo, *Rumour*, p. 10.

almost impossibly complex legalistic jargon employed when it is mentioned at all.<sup>103</sup> Given this, is it any wonder that the soldiers at My Lai offered no resistance to orders? In their eyes, any attempt to defy tactical commands during the operation would have resulted in disciplinary action, and their training prior to deployment was the origin of this thought process. As noted previously, Lt. Calley later testified that there was no concept of disobeying an order in the Army.<sup>104</sup> Whilst this perspective could justifiably be seen as an attempt by Calley to clutch at straws in his attempt to avoid prosecution for the massacre, it is unwise to simply dismiss it as a flailing attempt at acquittal. It corroborates the evidence provided by other servicemen, like Caputo, as well as the formal, researched analysis of the Peers Report. Crucially, it highlights the very real effect of training deficiencies out in the field in Vietnam, and the tragic consequences they could produce.

A decade after the horrors of Vietnam, the United States was engaged in training those who were fighting against an entrenched communist insurgency in an impoverished nation. The U.S. Army took on a leading role in instructing ESAF in how to carry out a war against a guerrilla force.<sup>105</sup> Just as in Vietnam, accusations of human rights violations were levelled at the U.S., with a number of academics, politicians and commentators arguing that U.S. Army personnel and institutions

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<sup>103</sup> *Peers Report*, p. 9-24.

<sup>104</sup> William L. Calley, 'Testimony at Court-Martial, 1970' in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (eds.), *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Bedford Books, 1998), p. 182.

<sup>105</sup> Siegel and Hackel, 'El Salvador: Counterinsurgency Revisited', p. 112.

were instrumental in forging an indigenous military force that routinely directed violence against civilians.<sup>106</sup>

Examining the training program for ESAF is a labyrinthine exercise. The duality of the assistance effort, with the United States providing training to Salvadoran troops alongside ESAF's own policies in combat instruction, means that it is a difficult proposition to judge the relative levels of influence of each approach. What is clear though is that the U.S. devoted a large amount of military resources to the training of a force that, upon the eruption of civil war in 1980, they hoped could defeat the insurgent forces of the FMLN.

American training for Salvadoran soldiers was provided through three sources. The first of these, the Military Assistance Program (MAP), was the initial grant-based program that aided the development of the Salvadoran military. Between the passing of the Mutual Security Act (1951) and the late 1960s, MAP was the dominant component of military aid to Latin America as a whole.<sup>107</sup> In 1976, Congress opted to phase out MAP assistance in favour of programs that were paid for by the country in question, and the MAP training segment became International Military Education and Training (IMET). This source of training for the Salvadorans was still based upon a grant system. Finally, Foreign Military Sales (FMS) allowed the Salvadoran government to purchase American arms, training, and technical support.

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<sup>106</sup> For more on such an opinion, see Lesley Gill, *School of the Americas* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), David Ross-Fairchild, 'Armies of compassion? United States military training in counterinsurgency doctrine at the School of the Americas' (Unpublished M.A thesis, University of Northern Colorado, 2004), and *The School of the Americas Watch* at [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org).

<sup>107</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Towards Latin America* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 213.



All of these programs were part of the effort by American administrations to influence the training of Salvadoran troops. IMET, however, was the primary method of dispensing U.S. influence onto ESAF. The basic purpose of the program, as noted in a Congressional presentation on the Security Assistance Program for financial year 1979, was rooted in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.<sup>108</sup> According to this earlier legislation, IMET was concerned with two primary goals. The first was to further international peace through the creation and maintenance of relations between the U.S. and foreign countries, whilst the second was to improve the self-reliance of countries by helping them utilise their security resources, and those bought from the U.S., more effectively. During the Carter administration, officials added a third clause to this legislation, with the 1978 International Security Act declaring that IMET was to increase human rights recognition in nations participating in its activities.<sup>109</sup> Though IMET was also regarded as a program capable of implementing U.S. foreign policy goals through interaction with foreign military leaders, this 1978 legislative caveat explicitly stated that American training programs were designed to instruct Salvadoran forces in human rights.<sup>110</sup>

Such emphasis on human rights was part of a new period of self-examination for the U.S. By 1976 American society was struggling to come to terms with the apparent loss of moral direction that had struck the country during Vietnam, and then again

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<sup>108</sup> 'Congressional Presentation Security Assistance Program FY1979', *Non-Classified, Congressional Presentation*, 1 February 1978.

<sup>109</sup> 'Legislation on Foreign Relations Through 2002', <[www.usaid.gov/policy/ads/faa.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/policy/ads/faa.pdf)> (22/7/2010).

<sup>110</sup> 'Congressional Presentation Security Assistance Program FY1979', *Non-Classified, Congressional Presentation*, 1 February 1978.

during the Watergate crisis.<sup>111</sup> A re-examination of U.S. foreign and military policy occurred amid accusations that a failure to adequately suppress human rights violations in Vietnam was a fundamental reason for the failures of that war.<sup>112</sup> President Carter, who displayed a ‘moralistic fervor’ over the matter, renewed America’s dedication to human rights on his election to the presidency.<sup>113</sup> During his administration, Salvadoran officers began to receive specific training at a secretive training program set up at American military schools in Panama. Regarded by American officials as ‘extremely sensitive’ and ‘experimental’, the training was designed to instruct these officers in the handling of guerrillas, whilst at the same time teaching them human rights.<sup>114</sup> This reflected a genuine desire among US government personnel, especially within the State Department, to encourage the Salvadoran military to resist the temptation of firing at everything and anything in its operations. One State Department official hoped that such training would gradually have a cumulative effect on Salvadoran troops, leading to a more discriminating military strategy in the future.<sup>115</sup>

Carter also used executive action to seek positive progress in the quest for human rights adherence in El Salvador. In 1977, he used presidential directives to purge the U.S. Army School of the Americas (USASOA) course list of the ‘Military

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<sup>111</sup> Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine: 1945-1993* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1994), p. 139.

<sup>112</sup> Arnson, *Crossroads*, p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 18 March 1977.

<sup>114</sup> *Washington Post*, 9 October 1980.

<sup>115</sup> *New York Times*, 9 October 1980.

Intelligence', 'Psychological Operations' and 'Jungle Warfare' modules.<sup>116</sup> Though information on the content of such courses is difficult to come by, the fact that Carter saw fit to personally direct their termination is perhaps testament to questionable ethical policies contained within.

Following the excision of these dubious programs, troops sent to the USASOA in 1980 were explicitly instructed in human rights. A specific three week course for several hundred ESAF lieutenants and captains commenced in August 1980, though American officials were hopeful, rather than sure, of its future influence on curbing human rights violations by ESAF.<sup>117</sup> Ambassador Robert White, himself a vocal critic of American military intervention in the country and a stringent proponent of human rights, was sufficiently impressed with the proposed course content that he 'strongly' recommended the reprogramming of money for the instruction.<sup>118</sup>

Unfortunately for Carter, there was a tendency for his policies to be undermined by an inability to implement them effectively.<sup>119</sup> In El Salvador, as had been the case in Vietnam, the nature of American military training weakened any legislative attempts to create a rigid human rights framework for troops. Formulated on the basis of contemporary military thought, U.S. training methods emphasised convention over this new focus on human rights and reform. Colonel John D. Waghelstein,

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<sup>116</sup> David Marcus Lauderback, 'The U.S. Army School of the Americas: Mission and Policy during the Cold War' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2004), p. 294.

<sup>117</sup> *New York Times*, 9 October 1980.

<sup>118</sup> 'Training at the School of the Americas', *Confidential, Cable San Salvador*, 16 July 1980.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Stohl, David Carleton and Steven E. Johnson, 'Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Assistance from Nixon to Carter', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (September, 1984), p. 216.

Commander of the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador between 1982 and 1983, and an advocate of counterinsurgency warfare, complained that even before the civil war erupted, Salvadoran troops were receiving conventional warfare training at the U.S. Army institutions they attended. By the late 1970s, counterinsurgency, in his opinion, was a 'nonsubject.'<sup>120</sup> Restricted by their institution's own rigorous adherence to conventionality, U.S. Army advisors passed on to their Salvadoran clients the methodologies that had contributed to the slaughter of civilians in Vietnam. Training Salvadorans to act as a conventional force in a counterinsurgency environment weakened the barriers to atrocity by diminishing political and civil action programs, and emphasising the military component of the conflict.

Personnel involved in the training of Salvadoran officers and enlisted soldiers were taken mainly from the Special Forces component of the U.S. Army. They were recruited and deployed to El Salvador as Military Training Teams (MTT). Even relatively innocuous training teams, such as a Logistics and Maintenance Support Team deployed in order to train the Salvadoran Army in the correct procedures for part replacements, were despatched from the Special Forces stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.<sup>121</sup> These MTTs constituted one of the most important aspects of the American training program in El Salvador.

The first such team was inserted into El Salvador on 12 November 1979 in order to train Salvadorans in riot control.<sup>122</sup> However, further teams were deployed to the

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 280.

<sup>121</sup> 'Effectiveness of Training, MTT, El Salvador', *Non-Classified, Memorandum*, 29 December 1980.

<sup>122</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 330.

country as the American assistance program was scaled up, and by 30 November 1981, within days of the massacre at El Mozote, eleven MTTs were involved in various aspects of the Salvadoran military.<sup>123</sup> Units such as the Tactical Intelligence MTT and the Small Unit Training Teams were intimately involved in attempting to teach aggressive, small unit combat techniques to Salvadoran troops. The Small Unit Training Teams had the most direct contact with those troops leading the assaults on guerrilla forces, and crucially, with those who would commit the most egregious human rights violations. According to an MTT status report filed on 30 November 1981, two Small Unit Training Teams, made up of five men each, had commenced the training cycle of eighty recruits for the Atlacatl Battalion.<sup>124</sup>

McClintock contends that because MTTs were made up of U.S. Army Special Forces personnel they were counterinsurgency experts, and were ‘specialists in organizing and training irregular forces for irregular warfare; perhaps not the best teachers to impart either traditional concepts of military discipline, or to excite a great deal of enthusiasm for the rules and restrictions of conventional warfare.’<sup>125</sup> In fact U.S. Army Special Forces were far from specialists in irregular warfare, particularly during the initial years of the MTT program. With the reorientation of the Army in the 1970s, the Special Forces’ mission had been re-aligned with conventional Army doctrine. Their stated purpose was to train indigenous resistance forces to support conventional operations.<sup>126</sup> Special Forces were little different from the rest of the

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<sup>123</sup> ‘US Military Training Teams in El Salvador as of 30 November 1981’, *Miscellaneous Document Type*, 30 November 1981.

<sup>124</sup> ‘US Military Training Teams in El Salvador as of 30 November 1981’

<sup>125</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 338.

<sup>126</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 70.

U.S. Army in the aftermath of Vietnam, during which the focus on opposing Soviet advances in Europe led to troops not being trained in counterinsurgency strategy and tactics.<sup>127</sup>

This conventionalism was shifted onto the Salvadoran units that MTTs interacted with. Rather than teaching specific counterinsurgency techniques, training focused on general infantry tactics, with little to no emphasis on the more complex nuances of counterinsurgency warfare. MTTs, who worked primarily with the Rapid Reaction Battalions (BIRIs), taught such basic skills as rifle marksmanship, first aid and communications.<sup>128</sup> Even two years into the civil war, with guerrilla forces seemingly undiminished in strength, MTTs had failed to adapt to the rigours of counterinsurgency warfare in El Salvador, and were maintaining their focus on teaching ESAF strictly conventional U.S. Army tactics, with strictly conventional American weapons.

Colonel Lyman Duryea, the U.S. Defense Attaché to El Salvador from 1983 to 1985, later admitted to frustration with the conventional, indiscriminate approach to combat by the Salvadorans, complaining that ESAF's use of 90mm recoilless rifles, mortars and .50 calibre machine guns was a pointless exercise that echoed ineffective U.S. airstrikes during Vietnam.<sup>129</sup> Duryea failed to mention that it was the MTTs who provided instruction in such weapons systems. The fact that significant burn damage was discovered by the El Mozote investigation team, suggests that the

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 405.

<sup>128</sup> 'U.S. Military Training Teams in El Salvador as of 31 January 1982', *Miscellaneous Document Type*, 31 January 1982.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Colonel Lyman Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 319.

Atlacatl Battalion was not averse to deploying the explosive weapons they were trained in against civilians.<sup>130</sup>

It is worth noting that the Atlacatl Battalion was one of the most notorious units of the Salvadoran conflict. As one of the specifically created BIRIs that were set up with the help of American forces, they have been singled out as examples of what American counterinsurgency training does to civilians. As well committing brutality at El Mozote, the Atlacatl Battalion also participated in attacks on civilians at the Gualsinga River in 1984,<sup>131</sup> Los Llanitos in the summer of the same year,<sup>132</sup> and in one of the most infamous cases of violence in El Salvador, the murder of the Jesuit priests in 1989.<sup>133</sup> Those who link U.S. training to the violence in the country point to the actions of the Atlacatl as evidence of the dire effects of such education.

In reality, the creation of BIRIs – such as the Atlacatl, Bellosa, and Atonal – was more about public relations than military realities. Though lauded by many observers, including the American media, as elite counterinsurgency units,<sup>134</sup> these units actually received only marginally upgraded training programs from their assigned MTTs and visits to U.S. Army service schools. Basic infantry tactics - marksmanship, fire-and-manoevre techniques and communications - were the staple elements of their training under American instructors; it was, in the words of

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<sup>130</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 255.

<sup>131</sup> *New York Times*, 15 September 1984.

<sup>132</sup> *New York Times*, 9 September 1984.

<sup>133</sup> *Report of the U.N. Truth Commission on El Salvador* <<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html>> (19/3/2010).

<sup>134</sup> *New York Times*, 13 July 1981.

the commanding officer of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces at Fort Bragg, ‘basic combat training similar to that given US (sic) soldiers.’<sup>135</sup> MTT personnel in country confessed to journalists that the reputation of the BIRIs as fearsome counterinsurgency units was wholly misplaced.<sup>136</sup>

The limits of their abilities were later acknowledged by Ambassador Deane Hinton, who conceded that ‘as far as I could see, they lacked the concept of immediate reaction.’<sup>137</sup> Just like the rest of ESAF, the individual soldiers tasked to these ‘elite’ units were often pressed into service, and scorned by the majority of officers.<sup>138</sup> Their willingness, and ability, to kill civilians in such large numbers was not forged from a counterinsurgency training program, but from the exhortations of particular officers and the conventionality of their training regime.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, the training given to Salvadorans at military installations in the United States, particularly Fort Benning, concentrated on conventional infantry tactics and leadership skills.<sup>140</sup>

Upon Reagan’s election to the White House, American officials maintained that human rights training was an important component of the military effort in El Salvador. As part of the U.S. Army’s training program for Salvadoran troops at Fort Benning, Georgia, journalist Michael Getler was granted restricted access to a highly controlled press event in April 1982. His subsequent article highlighted the extent of

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<sup>135</sup> *Washington Post*, 10 January 1982.

<sup>136</sup> *Washington Post*, 7 June 1981.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Ambassador Deane Hinton, *El Salvador at War*, p. 234.

<sup>138</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 39.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 237.



human rights training for ESAF troops at the course, with thirty eight hours of specifically human rights based education included in the six hundred and eighteen hours of predominantly tactical instruction.<sup>141</sup> This was alongside a specific course for officers in September 1982, and the U.S. Army's existing manuals on the laws of warfare which were made available to ESAF.<sup>142</sup> This was clearly an increase in the attention given to human rights compared with Vietnam.

However, the Reagan administration was more concerned about the extent to which ESAF's murderous record was impacting on domestic support for the President.<sup>143</sup> In public, Reagan and his team sought to reassure Congress and the public that ESAF was reforming itself, but in private, Reagan's ideological rigidity in combating communism gave rise to dubious, even illegal, practices within the U.S. training program for ESAF. In particular, the re-emergence of the USASOA, after more than two decades of increasing insignificance in the general context of instruction for Latin American militaries, gave rise to an alarming set of incidents which undermined attempts to professionalise ESAF and emphasise human rights.<sup>144</sup>

One of the most disturbing elements of the USASOA training program was the apparent willingness to sanction flagrantly illegal methods of countering opponents of the Salvadoran regime. Training manuals released by the Pentagon in 1996 illuminate the murky depths to which the U.S. was willing to go in order to create

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<sup>141</sup> *Washington Post*, 18 April 1982.

<sup>142</sup> 'Senate Foreign Relations Committee Questions on Human Rights Related Topics', *Confidential, Cable San Salvador*, 24 September 1982.

<sup>143</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 152.

<sup>144</sup> Lauderback, 'School of the Americas: Mission and Policy', p. 275.

indigenous forces capable of defeating insurgents during Reagan's presidency. Seven specific manuals, entitled 'Handling of Sources', 'Counterintelligence', 'Revolutionary War and Communist Ideology', 'Terrorism and the Urban Guerrilla', 'Interrogation', 'Combat Intelligence' and 'Analysis 1', were the subject of much scrutiny upon their declassification. Though much of their content is mundane, there are some startling suggestions that advocate highly suspect, and often illegal, methods of dealing with subversives.

Despite the fact that U.S. officials who conducted an investigation into their content complained of a lack of context over such extracts, it is hard to dispute the brutality of the more extreme measures proposed. Truth serum, false imprisonment and the utilisation of fear as a motivator were suggested as viable tactics.<sup>145</sup> The assassination of targets, hostile or otherwise, was also advocated as a solution to insurgency.<sup>146</sup> In removing the distinction between hostile and non-hostiles, these manuals were essentially advocating the targeting of non-combatants as a legitimate means of defeating the FMLN.

The manuals were representative of some course content at the USASOA during the 1980s. Officers had compiled the manuals from the substance of the 'Military Intelligence' module that USASOA had provided from 1982.<sup>147</sup> Only four of the seven manuals were given out to students, and were only offered as additional

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<sup>145</sup> *New York Times*, 22 September 1996.

<sup>146</sup> 'Fact Sheet Concerning Training Manuals Containing Materials Inconsistent with U.S. Policy', <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/archive/news/dodmans.htm#creation>> (22/7/2010).

<sup>147</sup> 'Improper Material in Spanish-Language Intelligence Manuals', <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/920310%20Improper%20Material%20in%20Spanish-Language%20Intelligence%20Training%20Manuals.pdf> (22/7/2010).

reading material for the Military Training course, available as a module twice between 1989 and 1991.<sup>148</sup> Though such material was in violation of United States policy, nevertheless, between 1987 and 1991, the Department of Defense estimated that as many as one thousand copies of the manuals could have been distributed by MTT's within the SouthCom theatre, including at the USASOA.<sup>149</sup>

The usage of torture manuals was not restricted to this one instance at the USASOA. Declassified National Security Archive documents point to links between Vietnam, the USASOA and these training manuals. Between 1965 and 1976 the USASOA provided training to Latin American troops, including Salvadoran forces, in which the use of dubious, even illegal, techniques for defeating the guerrillas were advocated. These techniques were the product of the Project X program, formed 'to develop an exportable foreign intelligence training package to provide counterinsurgency techniques learned in Vietnam to Latin American countries.'<sup>150</sup>

The Carter administration had terminated this form of training in 1976, but it is highly likely that Salvadoran forces would have come into contact with it given their presence at the school prior to this date. It is also worth pointing out that Major Vic Tise, in a July 1991 conversation regarding this topic, noted that objectionable material had been authorised by Washington for use at the USASOA in 1982.<sup>151</sup> Tise removed the material in question, but it is clear that highly suspect training methods

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<sup>148</sup> Ruth Blakeley, 'Still Training to Torture? US Training of Military Forces from Latin America', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 8 (2006), p. 1442.

<sup>149</sup> 'Improper Material in Spanish-Language Intelligence Manuals'.

<sup>150</sup> 'US SouthCom CI Training – Supplemental Information', <[http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/910801 USSOUTHCOM CI Training \(U\).pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/910801 USSOUTHCOM CI Training (U).pdf)> (22/7/2010).

<sup>151</sup> 'US SouthCom CI Training'.

began to be sanctioned by Washington as the Reagan administration stepped up its military approach to El Salvador. In 1982, 587 Salvadoran troops were educated at USASOA, followed by 762 in 1983. By 1990, 6,207 ESAF members had received instruction at the institution. So great was the ESAF presence at the facility that one member of the Bolivian Army commented that ‘the School of the Americas was for Salvadorans.’<sup>152</sup> Such a large number of Salvadoran graduates of the facility combined with the presence of highly questionable training material suggested that the USASOA failed to adequately enforce human rights training for ESAF during the Reagan administration.

However, even though Reagan’s administration placed a reduced emphasis on human rights concerns, it is possible to go too far in assigning responsibility to the U.S for Salvadoran atrocities. Even Lesley Gill, who argues forcefully that the USASOA created soldiers capable of terrorism and brutality, admits that no direct evidence is available to link those graduates who committed atrocity in El Salvador to the training they received at the USASOA.<sup>153</sup> The torture manuals on which Gill spends much of her time were not dispensed prior to 1987, nor has any documented evidence been uncovered that directly linked the USASOA, its Salvadoran pupils, and the massacres of civilians in their country.

Gill has also rejected the assertion that a propensity for violence by native militaries themselves can explain atrocity.<sup>154</sup> However, ESAF’s attitude to violating human

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<sup>152</sup> Gill, *School of the Americas*, p. 107.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

rights was, alongside American training in conventionality, the most important factor in creating a force liable to target innocents during the civil war. Perhaps the chief contributor was the unprofessionalism of ESAF's recruitment and domestic training programs; processes which the United States had little influence over. ESAF recruits were taught to hold contempt for civilians, but offered few tactics for successfully combating guerrillas. This combination created soldiers more than willing to target anyone they came into contact with when executing operations.

In theory, ESAF units were made up of recruits who, under Article 113 of the 1962 constitution, were required to commit to a period of military service when between the ages of 18 and 30.<sup>155</sup> In reality, units comprised almost any male that the Salvadoran military could force into service. The vast majority of enlisted soldiers in ESAF were taken from the poor masses of Salvadoran society, and had been forced into the military against their will: observers reported that it was common for young men to be pulled from the streets, for example after a movie had finished.<sup>156</sup> One Salvadoran, who later emigrated to the United States, recalled that the Salvadoran Army's initial approach to recruitment in the area near where he lived was to stop anyone at the crossroads to San Juan las Minas, and simply conscript anyone over the age of 18; later, as the civil war progressed, the Army began to lower its 'standards'. One practice involved forcing male civilians to stand with a

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<sup>155</sup> Brian J. Bosch, *The Salvadoran Officer Corps and the Final Offensive of 1981* (Jefferson, McFarland & Co., 1999), p. 14.

<sup>156</sup> *New York Times*, 6 May 1982.

rifle on their shoulder: if the rifle was not dragged, they were immediately sent to the Army.<sup>157</sup> It became routine for boys as young as 14 to be engaged in combat.<sup>158</sup>

The Woerner Report maintained that ‘recruitment goals for enlisted members are consistently exceeded’,<sup>159</sup> but what the report missed was that Salvadoran males often had little alternative but to enter the murderous clutches of the military. American advisors regarded the conditions in which Salvadoran enlisted troops served as being close to negligent,<sup>160</sup> but this attitude failed to take into account the incredible poverty that affected the majority of Salvadorans. Without any other employment option, these men were willing to stay for the meagre pay and the meal the Army provided.<sup>161</sup>

Given that the majority of recruits were taken from the very poor masses that were being targeted by the military in its murderous campaign, it would seem surprising that troops were willing to engage in extreme violence against their own social group. However, ESAF was quick to instil in its recruits a bitter hatred for those the military regarded as a threat to the status quo in El Salvador. Soldiers’ disdain for civilians, particularly the rural *campesino* produced an utter disregard for human life in the Salvadoran Army; an attitude implanted into recruits from an early point in their military career. During a four day trip to San Salvador, Reverend William

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with Juan Pleitez, [http://www.memoriaypaz.net/repression1.php?testi\\_id1=45](http://www.memoriaypaz.net/repression1.php?testi_id1=45) (26/9/2010).

<sup>158</sup> *New York Times*, 6 May 1982.

<sup>159</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 55.

<sup>160</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, ‘Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador’, *Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 18*, p. 98.

<sup>161</sup> *New York Times*, 24 July 1983.

Wipfler of the office of human rights of the National Council of Churches observed recruits chanting ‘Kill the people, kill the people’ during calisthenics.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, Karen DeYoung, a *Washington Post* journalist who attended the training camps of the Salvadoran Army in May 1979, claimed that Salvadoran troops were explicitly told to engage those members of the clergy who displayed non-conformist traits, such as non-clerical clothing, or even, bizarrely, those playing guitars or having beards.<sup>163</sup> Consequently, training for Salvadoran troops displayed an indiscriminate approach to the targets in the war, but also made explicit demands on its soldiers to target ‘un-patriotic’ portions of society.

When not explicitly instructing their troops to kill civilians and undesired sectors of Salvadoran society, ESAF was thrusting its troops into combat without any training whatsoever. The Woerner Report was particularly scathing in its analysis of the training regime for recruits, noting that a focus on fighting the FMLN had ‘resulted in the suspension of most formal training programs and the relegation of training, in practise, to secondary importance.’<sup>164</sup> The decision by the Salvadoran military to engage with its immediate security problems meant that even those units who received American advisors, like the BIRIs, sometimes suffered from incomplete training regimes.<sup>165</sup> A 31 March 1982 status update on the Infantry Battalion Phase 1 In-Country Individual Training MTT noted that its attempts were being hampered by

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<sup>162</sup> *Washington Post*, 3 April 1980.

<sup>163</sup> *Washington Post*, 3 April 1980.

<sup>164</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 98.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 236.

‘operations requirements which had priority’ which meant training itself was sporadic.<sup>166</sup>

Thus, ESAF’s own policies and strategic decisions had created a force which was already predisposed towards violence prior to American involvement, and even when U.S. advisors were engaged in seeking to influence Salvadoran units, they were often stymied by Salvadoran dynamics. Salvadorans expressed resentment towards the advisors sent to aid them, and this weakened the impact American instructors had. Some indigenous troops felt American assistance was an infringement on Salvadoran sovereignty.<sup>167</sup> Other members of ESAF, particularly amongst the officer corps, felt the tactics and strategy impressed upon them by U.S. advisors was ineffective in this particular conflict, and that sweeping repression was the means of not only defeating the insurgency militarily, but was also an important method of generating fear in the remaining population.<sup>168</sup>

This was not merely a contemporary attitude. During the *Matanza* the nation’s combat leaders had forcefully rejected American assistance. When a U.S. Navy squadron relayed a query asking if assistance was required, El Salvador’s leaders quickly answered with a resolute no. In their eyes the threat of American interference was only marginally more appealing than the leftist uprising they were in the midst

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<sup>166</sup> ‘U.S. Training Teams in El Salvador as of 31 March 1982’, *Non-Classified, Miscellaneous Document Type*, 31 March 1982.

<sup>167</sup> Michael Childress, *The Effectiveness of US Training Efforts in Internal Defense and Development: The Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica, National Defense Research Institute, 1995), p. 28.

<sup>168</sup> Lauria-Santiago, ‘Culture and Politics’, p. 100.



of subjugating.<sup>169</sup> During the 1980s, U.S. advisors were more than aware of such attitudes. One noted that ‘You have to be very careful how you give advice... If you give it like an order, it doesn’t work. This is their war and they don’t let you forget it.’<sup>170</sup>

An inability to influence their charges on the training ground is perhaps one reason as to why some American advisors adopted a more hands-on approach. A handful of documented cases noted the presence of American advisors out in the field with ESAF units. During the early stages of 1982, in an operation to reconstruct a demolished bridge in the Usulután department, five U.S. Army personnel were found to have joined their Salvadoran counterparts in the field, as well as carrying rifles during the course of their transgression. Lt. Col. Harry Melander, whom the American Ambassador to El Salvador described as a ‘first-class officer who made a mistake’, was recalled from the country, whilst the other U.S. Army troops involved received reprimands.<sup>171</sup> In the same year, it was alleged by members of ESAF during a CBS newscast that American troops had engaged in combat with guerrilla forces at a base guarding the Lempa River railway bridge.<sup>172</sup>

These incidents represented flagrant breaches of the terms of reference for advisors. The regulations provided to American military personnel conducting training operations were quite explicit in the limitations that were to be imposed upon their

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<sup>169</sup> Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 130.

<sup>170</sup> *New York Times*, 26 May 1983.

<sup>171</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 14 February 1982.

<sup>172</sup> *Washington Post*, 25 June 1982.

actions there. Amongst some of the key regulations were demands that U.S. military personnel not go on patrols with ESAF, place themselves in situations where combat was considered likely or wear the traditional symbol of American Special Forces: the green beret.<sup>173</sup> The regulations had an important political dynamic which reflected the deep seated fears within the American public, and Congress, of a return to a Vietnam quagmire in the counterinsurgency conflicts of Central America.<sup>174</sup> Much of the focus revolved around the issue of American troops in a combat role in El Salvador, and the Reagan administration was keen not to stir up the painful memories of America's recent military debacle in South East Asia. Thus, the terms of reference for advisors in El Salvador were stringent, and though the restrictions on movement were a source of considerable frustration for many advisors,<sup>175</sup> they reflected political considerations back in Washington D.C.

However, given that the American assistance program for El Salvador was of a highly covert nature, and given the dangerous security situation in the country itself, the advisory positions offered within the U.S. Army often attracted more aggressive candidates. John Ellerson, who commanded the U.S. Military Group effort in El Salvador from 1986 to 1988, noted that that it was sometimes necessary for the U.S. military to stop advisors from becoming 'cowboys', given the aggressive type of character that the covert, dangerous assignment attracted.<sup>176</sup> These regulations were therefore also an attempt by the United States, from an early stage in the civil war, to

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<sup>173</sup> 'Terms of Reference (Restrictions on US Military Personnel in El Salvador), *Unclassified, Memorandum*, 6 March 1981.

<sup>174</sup> Arnson, *Crossroads*, p. 22.

<sup>175</sup> *Washington Post*, 7 June 1981.

<sup>176</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 154.

limit any possible unauthorised training by its advisors. The fact that some were willing to breach these rules perhaps indicates the extent to which individual American advisors felt themselves to be restricted by their own government and marginalised by the Salvadorans they were teaching.

American influence was further eroded by the transitional nature of the MTT system. As in Vietnam, the rotational nature of serving in El Salvador produced a lack of institutional memory. Stanley commented on the ability of Salvadoran officers to ‘manipulate, sweet-talk, mislead, and betray their U.S patrons with panache and impunity’ with regards to the shifting diplomatic staff that transited in and out of the country throughout the period.<sup>177</sup> The same can be argued for the MTT personnel who came into contact with Salvadoran officers, and troops, who were resentful of U.S. interference in what they regarded as their own war. Advisors served only twelve months in country,<sup>178</sup> and just as in Vietnam, this allowed only limited exposure to the full nature of the problems of counterinsurgency. Both American military and diplomatic staff recognised the futility of this approach to the situation. General Wallace H. Nutting, the Commander of SouthCom from 1979 to 1983, disliked the policy,<sup>179</sup> and Thomas Pickering, who served as the U.S. Ambassador from 1983 to 1985, later asserted that the ‘thing I fought like hell for, and had an enormous problem with, was longer tours for military people.’<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 264.

<sup>178</sup> Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, p. 103.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with General Wallace H. Nutting, *El Salvador at War*, p. 243.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Ambassador Thomas Pickering, *El Salvador at War*, p. 243.

Without a sustained presence in Salvadoran units, American influence was diminished and countermanded by Salvadoran officers. In the case of the Atlacatl Battalion this allowed a unit trained and armed in American military conventionality to be used by a commanding officer, Domingo Monterrosa, who was aggressive and hard-line.<sup>181</sup> This was merely one problem with the American training program in El Salvador. When put alongside the conflicting messages on human rights and basic misconceptions over the level of professionalism in ESAF, it is little wonder that one U.S. Defense Attaché resignedly believed that, in 1986, the United States was still looking at a minimum of twenty years before positive changes emerged in ESAF.<sup>182</sup>

The importance of proper training in deterring human rights abuses should not be underestimated. Jordan J. Paust passionately urged that ‘human beings must ultimately receive the proper education, training and guidance to attenuate the evils of violence and make human rights more effective.’<sup>183</sup> His plea, contained in an article of such lucidity and impact that it was cited by the court in *United States v Calley*, is a stark pointer to the behaviour that can occur in combat when such education is lacking during the formative stages of a soldier’s career. The effectiveness of human rights in Vietnam and El Salvador was substantially limited by the training undergone by U.S. and Salvadoran militaries.

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<sup>181</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 38.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Colonel Lyman C. Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 303.

<sup>183</sup> Captain Jordan J. Paust, ‘My Lai and Vietnam: Norms, Myths and Leader Responsibility’, *Military Law Review*, Vol. 57 (Summer, 1972), p. 101.

Though many U.S. Army soldiers gratefully acknowledged the tactical benefits of their training regime,<sup>184</sup> the limitations of such instruction became clear in the actions of those who killed civilians in Vietnam. The Army had neglected to fully impart the necessity of adherence to human rights and international treaties upon its own members in the opening stages of their military careers, opting to sacrifice ethical behaviour in favour of aggression and conventional military characteristics.

In El Salvador, as Lars Schoultz points out, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty that the training provided by U.S. forces to Salvadoran troops caused them, directly or indirectly, to carry out brutal human rights violations.<sup>185</sup> However, the conventionality of U.S. military doctrine taught an already poorly created and maintained indigenous force the wrong lessons. Though U.S. Army MTTs and service schools increased their instructions in human rights for ESAF pupils, their work was undermined by lapses in judgement from other elements of the American assistance effort – most notably the authors of the training manuals propagated during the 1980s at the USASOA. Individual advisors also displayed poor judgement in accompanying ESAF units into the field and providing personal judgement on the strategy to be utilised.

Removing the limitations and counter-balances against atrocity that lie in a human being was not the express purpose of training for Vietnam and El Salvador, but it

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<sup>184</sup> See, for example, 'Interview with Gary Franklin', (15/4/2010), 'Interview with Antoine Roy', 8 January 2003, Antoine Roy Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010), 'Interview with Timothy Vail', (15/4/2010), 'Interview with Robert Scott Dawson', (19/4/2010), and 'Interview with Russell C. Palm', 22 June 2002, Russell C. Palm Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

<sup>185</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights*, p. 236.

was nevertheless the by-product of the regimes implemented in the basic training allocated to American and Salvadoran soldiers. It taught them the skills required to kill, and sought to provide justifications for heightened aggression. Philip Caputo, whose *A Rumor of War* remains one of the most lucid and thought-provoking tales of the Vietnam War, recalled that despite gaining all the positive benefits of military service from their training – courage, loyalty and *esprit de corps* – he and his fellow soldiers paid the price of ‘a diminished capacity for compassion.’<sup>186</sup> Training sent soldiers into a maelstrom of violence and brutality with the skills to join in, but limited their capacity to resist.

‘You’d gone to gladiator school.’<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Caputo, *Rumor*, p. 21.

<sup>187</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 25.

### Chapter 3: Conducting Conventional Warfare

‘The United States entered the Vietnam War with a doctrine well suited to fighting conventional war in Europe, but worse than useless for the counterinsurgency it was about to combat.’<sup>188</sup> – John A. Nagl.

Nagl’s brutal assessment of the US Army during the Vietnam War is of crucial importance to understanding how atrocity could occur in the environments that Vietnam and El Salvador presented to U.S. and Salvadoran soldiers. For the armies that operated in these two conflicts, their inability to conduct a sustained, viable and effective counterinsurgency program was not only a damning indictment of their approach to these wars, but was also a powerful factor in the atrocities committed there. The opening chapter of this thesis noted that counterinsurgency was marginalised in both conflicts, in favour of conventional warfare. This chapter will build on this, assessing how conventional doctrine translated into the tactics used by soldiers during combat in Vietnam and El Salvador.

Since defending the population was regarded as a secondary concern behind conducting aggressive anti-guerrilla operations, units in Vietnam were less inclined to plan and implement operations that placed the safety of civilians at the forefront of their thinking. A number of units in Vietnam executed operations that, if not deliberately targeting non-combatants, made little effort to restrain the enormous levels of firepower that were unleashed upon objectives. Clearly the Americal Division in its operation in My Lai was one such force. Elsewhere in Vietnam, the

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<sup>188</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 115.

emphasis on attrition fuelled indiscriminate operations by a variety of forces, ranging in size and scope. In the Mekong Delta, as part of IV Corps, the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division implemented a campaign that was the apotheosis of U.S. Army policy. At the behest of its commanding officer, Major General Julian Ewell, the division created a vast array of statistical categories for the purpose of determining success and failure, not only in terms of the war's progression, but also for evaluating the specific performances of individual units and their officers. Ewell was brutal in his criteria for his men, stating that, 'if a battalion saw that some other battalion was getting four hundred or six hundred kills a month, and they were getting fifty, they'd immediately think, I'd better get off my ass and do something.'<sup>189</sup>

Maximising the body count was thus not simply a matter of meeting strategic demands; commanding officers such as Ewell also regarded it as a necessary step for career progression. The pressure created for subordinate officers was therefore substantial, and led to the bending, and breaking, of the accepted norms of combat. Krepinevich noted that in one confidential interview, the participant – a former member of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry – recalled one officer in the division 'literally flying the blades off the helicopters and killing Americans to increase the body count.'<sup>190</sup> The same source also claimed, in brutally honest fashion, that 'we really blew a lot of civilians away.'<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Krepinevich, *Army*, p. 204.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p. 205.



The 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was particularly prone to use helicopters as assault components. Ewell defended his division's use of helicopters in his own self-congratulatory *Sharpening the Combat Edge*, during which he used a wealth of statistical indicators on the effectiveness of air combat assets to try to prove his case that aerial support produced more effective combat operations.<sup>192</sup>

Ewell's innumerable data confirms greater numbers of enemy were killed when air assets were used, but he neglects to mention that his approach to combat from the air precluded the identifying of genuine enemy combatants and that eyewitnesses to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry's aerial assaults were hugely critical of the indiscriminate nature of these operations.<sup>193</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry's approach to combat represented a slow-burning My Lai, one in which civilian casualties were inflicted over a much greater period of time, and often from a more distant platform, but with equal disregard for civilian life. Further North in Quang Ngai, this approach was condensed into operations of short, sharp brutality, but over a sustained period of time that raised serious questions about the levels of oversight in the U.S. Army, and about the way in which soldiers were obliged to prosecute the war.

In 2003, the *Toledo Blade* newspaper published the results of an eight month investigation into the actions of Tiger Force, a specifically created U.S. Army unit that operated in Vietnam as a specialised reconnaissance unit for the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. Working from interviews and a vast array of Army documents, logs and reports -

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<sup>192</sup> Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell and Major General Ira. A Hunt, Jr., *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgement* (Washington D.C., Department of the Army, 1995), p. 56.

<sup>193</sup> Krepinevich, *Army*, p. 204.

many recently declassified – the newspaper uncovered the activities of Tiger Force, the extent of which had not been previously known. The unit, a 45 man platoon, ‘violently lost control.’<sup>194</sup> It embarked on a sustained campaign of murder, deliberately targeting civilians. Spurred on by officers who actively encouraged the brutality, and unrestrained by the lack of oversight or judicial investigation by the Army, the unit murdered a large number of civilians during its time in Quang Ngai province.

The experiences of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry and Tiger Force neatly encapsulate the Vietnam environment. In the former’s case, the entire Army concept – ‘counterinsurgency American-style’ – was illustrated in all its indiscriminate glory. In the latter’s case, we can see how particularly experiences and specific unit deficiencies combined with the powerful dynamics of Vietnam to create chaos and tragedy. It is intriguing to note that Tiger Force operated within 10 miles of Task Force Barker, the subordinate unit of the Americal Division which committed the massacre at My Lai. Both were based in Quang Ngai, at the same logistical camp, and both executed similar search-and-destroy missions in the volatile northern province. Quang Ngai represented the worst of Vietnam for U.S. troops, and was regarded by those who served there as a particularly difficult region<sup>195</sup>. It was an unforgiving location, far enough North to contain infiltrating regular main force enemy units, but with part of the populated coastal plain running along its Eastern shoreline, it also offered a worthwhile target for the hamlet-orientated terror of the Viet Cong. Troops faced the knowledge that the enemy was very much in the region, but frequently faced little

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<sup>194</sup> *Toledo Blade*, 19 October 2003.

<sup>195</sup> ‘Interview with Michael Morris’, 21 January 2003, Michael Morris Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

definite contact. As such, it would have proved a fertile breeding ground for atrocity, and it seems that on multiple occasions, brutality burst forth in savage misconduct.

Given that the combat environment in Vietnam was so volatile, the issue of military justice becomes crucial. Punishments and threats of punishment act as a deterrent, restraining soldiers' actions in situations where civilian law is clearly inapplicable. The evidence from the examples of Tiger Force and Task Force Barker suggest that military justice failed to act as a constraining influence. From the beginning of the intervention in Vietnam, military lawyers were deployed as part of the American effort. The peculiar mix of circumstances in Vietnam – a counterinsurgency war, an effort at nation-building, the combination of Vietnamese and American civilian, government and military agencies – meant that the issue of law was of particular importance during both the advisory and intervention years.<sup>196</sup> Moreover, there was no unified legal department in the US military. Each command and each unit had its own legal representatives. Whilst Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) employed lawyers as part of its overall command of the American presence in Vietnam, the US Army as a subordinate command employed its own legal staff with a separate brief and jurisdiction.

The introduction of combat troops resulted in the divergence of the military justice system in Vietnam, producing in a more streamlined MACV legal staff, which transferred the work of courts-martial prosecution and defence into the hands of the

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<sup>196</sup> Maj. Gen. George S Prugh, *Law at War: Vietnam – 1964 - 1973* (Washington D.C., Department of the Army, 1975), p. v.

U.S. Army's own Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG).<sup>197</sup> As such, it was the U.S. Army's legal staff that bore primary responsibility for making sure that the system of courts-martial was implemented effectively. Indeed, according to Borch, courts-martial made up the majority of the U.S. Army's legal staff's workload.<sup>198</sup> Their influence on the proceedings ranged from direct representation to indirect advisory roles, as in the case of special courts-martial, in which non-legal staff would require guidance from a professional. Between 1965 and 1969, approximately 25,000 courts-martial were convened, though a large number of these were for relatively minor infractions.<sup>199</sup>

The sheer number of courts-martial would seem to suggest a competent judicial system, but the statistics do not tell the whole tale. Whilst a great many cases were tried before the relevant military authorities, the U.S. Army displayed, at best, a remarkable tolerance for unrestrained combat operations, and at worst simply looked the other way as members of its service committed cold-blooded murder. Officials, some in JAG office itself, knew of explicit violations of the rules of war, yet refused to investigate because it would have been seen as inhibiting practical combat tactics.<sup>200</sup> Such leniency was a barrier to the effective implementation of military justice, but even when very serious incidents were flagged to the necessary legal

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<sup>197</sup> Frederic L. Borch III, *Judge Advocates in Vietnam: Army Lawyers in Southeast Asia, 1959 -1975* (Fort Leavenworth, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2003), p.31.

<sup>198</sup> Borch, *Judge Advocates*, p. 49.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>200</sup> 'Interview with James Endicott', 17 September 2000, James Endicott Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

authorities there was often a disturbing unwillingness to investigate the matter promptly and fully.<sup>201</sup>

Far from being a short-term issue, this lack of thorough and publicly documented investigations into war-crimes in Vietnam was a prolonged issue that reached into the 1970s and beyond. The *Toledo Blade*'s investigation into the Tiger Force unit not only focused on the behaviour of the unit itself, but also on the subsequent failure of US Army investigators to conduct a comprehensive inquiry. Having received a tip in 1971 from Sgt. Gary Coy that a member of Tiger Force had decapitated a Vietnamese infant, the Army's investigative branch was mandated to investigate the complaint. Lasting four and a half years, the investigation into the matter underlined the extent to which the Army focused on forgetting Vietnam. Set procedures were ignored, as Army personnel conducting the inquiry failed in many of the basic tasks required of them. Army members suspected of performing illegal acts whilst serving with Tiger Force were allowed to leave the service, thereby negating the Army's ability to compel them to testify. Victims were not interviewed, nor were witnesses. Perhaps most shocking of all was the fact that Tiger Force members stated to the *Toledo Blade* that Army investigators sought to cover up the crimes, seeking to persuade witnesses to claim ignorance of the events, so that, in the words of one Army investigator, 'I can get the thing over with.'<sup>202</sup> In doing so, the Army offered few disincentives for breaching the rules of war.

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<sup>201</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 2006.

<sup>202</sup> *Toledo Blade*, 20 October 2003.

Whilst such criminally negligent attitudes and actions were not uniform throughout the Army in the post-Vietnam period, they did represent part of the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ which infected the Army – and America as a nation – in the years after the war. Though Reagan would defend the ‘noble cause’ of Vietnam during his 1980 campaign,<sup>203</sup> the conduct of the war had left America wary of getting involved in a similar fight again. Such public caution, however, did not stop the Carter administration, and then the Reagan government, from supporting a war in El Salvador that bore many of the tactical hallmarks of Vietnam.

‘I can not see inside the house from which someone is shooting at me; nor in those circumstances am I very disposed to waste time trying to find out who else might be in the house.’<sup>204</sup> – Colonel Domingo Monterrosa.

U.S. assistance to El Salvador was of a conventional nature, based, as noted in the opening chapter, around the American military’s emphasis on regular warfare in the aftermath of Vietnam. American influence on ESAF’s combat operations sprang out of this philosophy. The area in which the United States had perhaps the greatest influence on the conduct of the Salvadoran military was in the supply of war materiel. American arms and ammunition had flowed into El Salvador throughout the post-war period. The United States Office of Public Safety had instituted a program in 1957 that provided weapons and equipment for the police in the country,

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<sup>203</sup> *New York Times*, 19 August 1980.

<sup>204</sup> ‘Conversation with Atlacatl Battalion Officers Concerning; Alleged Mis-Conduct of the Army in Morazán Department’, *Confidential, Cable*, 1 February 1982.

with the assistance shifting to the National Guard in 1963. Though the program was terminated in 1974, after providing 2045 carbines and revolvers plus 775,000 rounds of ammunition,<sup>205</sup> it was an early example of the flow of weapons from the United States to El Salvador. Although El Salvador rejected American military aid in 1977, in protest over what it perceived as undue criticism of its human rights policies, the outbreak of hostilities in 1980 led to the resumption of arms transfers between the two countries.

It was through the supply of war material that the effects of the United States' conventional military strategy were most clearly felt. Modern, but unsuitable, weapons systems were introduced; notably the helicopter, which came to represent the 'inescapable sign of the US stamp that is beginning to emerge on this dismal and ugly little Central American war.'<sup>206</sup> Ironically, their transfer was originally intended as a bargaining chip in the Carter administration's fight to curb human rights violations by the Salvadoran armed forces. The offer to provide the helicopters – six UH-1Hs – was 'made on the understanding that the JRG (Revolutionary Governing Junta) and the military high command will take specific measures to reduce and effectively bring under control the indiscriminate violence which emanates from elements of the armed forces.'<sup>207</sup> In reality, though, the provision of airmobile assets to ESAF provided greater capacity for bloodshed. Some of the most notorious massacres were dependent on the mobility provided by helicopters. On 30 August

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<sup>205</sup> Cynthia Arnson, 'Beefing Up the Salvadoran Military Forces: Some Components of U.S. Intervention' in David Mermelstein, Patrick Lacefield and Marvin E. Gettleman (eds.), *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* (New York, Grove Press, 1981), p. 223.

<sup>206</sup> *Washington Post*, 7 May 1981.

<sup>207</sup> 'Helicopters for El Salvador', *Secret, Cable*, 9 August 1980.

1984, the Atlacatl Battalion cordoned off villagers near the Gualsinga River through the use of helicopters, before proceeding to open fire on hundreds of the stranded people.<sup>208</sup> In May 1980, soldiers from multiple elements of the Salvadoran military targeted civilians attempting to flee into Honduras across the Sumpul River, engaging directly from two helicopters and killing 300 non-combatants.<sup>209</sup> Helicopters were even used for the benefit of unofficial militarised killing units, for example in the evacuation of one death squad who had killed a number of peasants before raping and decapitating one young girl in Santa Helena.<sup>210</sup>

Though the United States was not responsible for the use of helicopters by Salvadoran units, it was naive and misguided for the Carter and Reagan administrations to provide such transportation for a military as unprofessional as ESAF. Not only were they a platform from which greater levels of indiscriminate violence could be employed against defenceless civilians, but they further emphasised an unproductive, conventional approach to the conflict. Ironically, senior American advisors in El Salvador were dubious about the use of helicopters. One even admitted to doubts over the efficiency of air power in counterinsurgency wars, stating that ‘there’s no substitute for the soldier on the ground talking to a campesino.’<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *New York Times*, 15 September 1984.

<sup>209</sup> *U.N. Truth Commission*, p. 121.

<sup>210</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 330.

<sup>211</sup> Siegel and Hackel, ‘El Salvador: Counterinsurgency Revisited’, p. 119.



As with helicopters, the provision of huge quantities of heavy infantry weapons also encouraged conventional attrition-based strategies. The supply of individual and crew serviced weapons and the necessary ammunition was a crucial part of the United States' assistance program to the country and an area of the conflict in which the American influence on tactics was especially notable. Particularly sizeable following Reagan's election to the presidency, supplies of infantry firearms became one of the most important examples of American aid for the Salvadoran officers in charge of the civil war's operations. It was something of a disappointment for American advisors when Salvadoran troops favoured employing these weapons in long-distance, fire-and-hope operations rather than specific small unit raids on the guerrillas and their bases. Some advisors admitted to frustration, arguing that the Salvadorans were using weapons simply because they were in the arsenal. Having been armed in such a way by American forces, the Salvadorans perceived that 'the approved solution is to mount the .50 and hammer away at the next hillside, much in the same manner as in Vietnam when we pounded places with air strikes to absolutely no avail.'<sup>212</sup> However, despite the occasional astute observation from individuals, American advisors aided ESAF with their Tables of Organisation and Equipment, and by extension placed such weaponry in the hands of Salvadoran troops.<sup>213</sup>

It is notable that the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), in a 14 January 1981 commentary on the situation in El Salvador, made mention of the presence of heavy weapons in the conflict. Rather than advocating the continuing procurement of such

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<sup>212</sup> Interview with Colonel Lyman Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 319.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Colonel Lyman Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 320.

weapons systems, the DIA noted that ‘heavy weapons possessed by the government – i.e., artillery, armored vehicles, and jet aircraft – have limited utility and are largely neutralized by terrain and the nature of the conflict.’<sup>214</sup> Such analysis suggests a fissure in the American assistance program; one agency recognising the futility of such armaments, other agencies actively placing these weapons in the arsenals of Salvadoran units on operations. It is a point picked up on by many who were actively involved in the United States presence in El Salvador.<sup>215</sup> The absence of a unified command structure for the American effort,<sup>216</sup> contributed to the continuing supply of inappropriate weapons systems despite the doubts expressed by observers like the DIA and Colonel Duryea.

Heavy weapons systems were not the only contributory factor to massacre in El Salvador. Ballistics evidence from the site of the massacre at El Mozote points to the prevalence and extensive use of American small arms in ESAF operations. Of the two hundred and forty five cartridge cases collected from the El Mozote site by a team of Argentine forensic anthropologists in a 1992 investigation, one hundred and eighty four had a readable headstamp which located their production in Lake City, Missouri.<sup>217</sup> The American forensic experts who analysed the Argentines’ findings also concluded that all but one of the weapons used to fire the projectiles were M-16 rifles, manufactured in the United States.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> ‘Observations on the Deteriorating Situation in El Salvador’, *Defense Intelligence Agency Commentary*, 14 January 1981.

<sup>215</sup> Interviews with General Wallace H. Nutting and Colonel John Cash, *El Salvador at War*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 242.

<sup>217</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 255.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, p. 255.

It could be argued that the presence of American weapons systems in the conflict in El Salvador was not in and of itself a deciding factor in ESAF's decision to engage in massacring civilians. ESAF received military materiel from other sources than the United States during the 1970s. Israel was a particularly important contributor to El Salvador's military arsenal, providing fighter bombers in 1975 to the Salvadoran air force,<sup>219</sup> as well as Uzi sub-machine-guns and 80mm rocket launchers.<sup>220</sup> Both France and Brazil also provided weapons systems.<sup>221</sup> For much of the 1970s, the Belgian G-3 rifle was the standard infantry weapon for Salvadoran troops,<sup>222</sup> and ammunition was bought in large quantities from Belgium and Yugoslavia.<sup>223</sup> In a nation in which the machete was historically prevalent as a weapon,<sup>224</sup> ESAF would surely have found the means from other nations, as well as through its own low-tech approach, to execute its policy of massacre and terror during the civil war.

At the very least, though, failing to use the military procurement relationship to effectively push ESAF towards counterinsurgency strategies meant the U.S. missed an opportunity. Instead, the United States provided a large proportion of the weapons and ammunition required for the Salvadoran military to engage in brutality and

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<sup>219</sup> 'Background Information on the Security Forces in El Salvador and U.S. Military Assistance', *Report*, 1 March 1980.

<sup>220</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 329.

<sup>221</sup> 'Background Information on the Security Forces in El Salvador and U.S. Military Assistance', *Report*, 1 March 1980.

<sup>222</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 328.

<sup>223</sup> 'El Salvador's Deteriorating Political Situation', *Confidential, Cable San Salvador*, 12 February 1980.

<sup>224</sup> See Anderson, *Matanza*, for accounts of the brutality inflicted by the machete.

terror. In addition to being involved in the direct procurement process, the United States authorised private contractors to supply the Salvadoran military. Between fiscal year 1971 and 1980, the State Department's Office of Munitions Control permitted two million dollars worth of arms sales between American weapons companies and the Salvadoran military.<sup>225</sup> Between 1975 and 1978 alone, over twenty million rifle, handgun and machinegun cartridges were sold to El Salvador by American firms.<sup>226</sup> Such vast quantities of ammunition provided ESAF with more than enough firepower to escalate the brutality of its operations. American military officers had a crucial influence within the process of selling weapons to foreign nations.<sup>227</sup> As such, the post-Vietnam military's conventional outlook was also likely to have had an impact on these commercial weapons sales. Even when not directly supplying arms or training assistance, the U.S. military establishment was reinforcing conventionality in ESAF through its presence in the U.S. government's commercial arms procurement bureaucracy.

The problem for the United States was that it was engaged in a military effort alongside an ally which was stunningly brutal in its approach to warfare, and wracked by division and ineffectiveness. It is difficult to comprehend just how unprofessional the Salvadoran military was in its approach to defeating opponents, both preceding the civil war and during the bloody years of official conflict. Historical precedents had mixed with contemporary requirements to create a military force that had no qualms about employing a strategy of deliberate massacre. The

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<sup>225</sup> 'Background Information on the Security Forces in El Salvador and U.S. Military Assistance', *Report*, 1 March 1980.

<sup>226</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 328.

<sup>227</sup> Schoultz, *Human Rights*, p. 227.

United States failed through ineffectiveness, misunderstanding and often unwillingness in its attempts to change the strategic trajectory of an organisation which had evolved over the course of the twentieth century into a brutal purveyor of state terror. The soldiers who committed massacre during the civil war did so as a result of a strategy that, whilst dependent on American material assistance and toleration, was primarily the product of Salvadoran factors.

The toleration of brutality in ESAF was not a matter of lazy commanders, unwilling to examine the behaviour of their troops. It was a calculated attitude, which not only reinforced the bonds of loyalty within the military, but also helped ESAF to wage the kind of war that it deemed necessary to defeat the insurgents – or at least terrorise the population into submission. The U.S. Army was perfectly aware of this, with Woerner noting that the Army displayed a ‘remarkable capacity for tolerating unprofessional and improper conduct which does not threaten the institution.’<sup>228</sup>

Whilst the security forces and their unofficial death squad offshoots, had employed a selective approach in countering leftists during the 1960s and 1970s, eliminating individual rural leadership elements along with traditional urban foes such as trade unionists, lawyers and religious leaders, the onset of civil war in 1980 brought about a shift to a much more general level of repression.<sup>229</sup> Faced with a militarised foe in the shape of the FMLN, the Army deliberately targeted vast swathes of the countryside in an effort to eradicate support for the guerrillas, as well as to destroy the guerrilla forces themselves. ESAF units armed themselves with heavy weaponry

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<sup>228</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 43.

<sup>229</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 305.

and set off on search-and-destroy operations in the countryside. Upon entering the operational area, ESAF units would engage in futile attempts to locate, pin down and destroy concentrations of guerrillas. The rebels, who were in the process of perfecting insurgency themselves, engaged ESAF on their own terms and inflicted embarrassing levels of damage on the American-backed Salvadoran military. When the guerrillas withdrew - more often than not this was a voluntary decision rather than a necessity - the Army was left isolated in dangerous, remote locations. Frustrated, eager to lighten their loads of ammunition, and commanded by brutal leadership elements, ESAF troops often opted to open fire on those they were able to find: civilians. Satisfied that they had successfully cleansed the area of 'subversives', the Army duly departed, leaving the guerrilla forces to infiltrate back, overwhelming any token patrols left by the Army and taking control of the region once more.<sup>230</sup>

The emotional impact of these operations will be discussed in the final chapter, but from an operational point of view, such chaotic policy loosened the restraints on soldiers acting out of turn. Osiel has argued that the organisation of soldiers prior to, and during, combat is the most important factor in seeking to prevent atrocity.<sup>231</sup> It is clear that in relation to ESAF's behaviour in the field, the poorly constructed and maintained system of warfare that was implemented can take a huge portion of the responsibility for the actions of soldiers at places like El Mozote.

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<sup>230</sup> Danner, *Massacre*, p. 41.

<sup>231</sup> Osiel, 'Obeying Orders', p. 1028.

The Woerner Report recognised that the greatest problem facing ESAF was its command control mechanisms.<sup>232</sup> During the initial years of the civil war, El Salvador was separated into military zones, each of which was made up of three departments. Each department contained three infantry battalions. The commanding officer of each military zone, a full colonel, was also the local Brigade commander. American advisors were critical of this, and believed that the position required a General.<sup>233</sup> However, under Salvadoran tradition, the department commanders maintained a staggering degree of autonomy in how they conducted operations, even to the extent of circumventing the Brigade commander and going straight to the High Command for clarification of orders.<sup>234</sup>

This allowed only limited oversight. Departmental commanders could utilise their forces in whatever manner suited them. Thus, commanders essentially became ‘warlords’, exercising their right to fight the rebels in whatever manner they deemed appropriate.<sup>235</sup> Limited oversight was not restricted to the organisation of the command structure, however. Vital links which could preclude indiscriminate assaults on civilians were non-existent in El Salvador. Aerial power, as previously noted, had a devastating effect on the level of civilian casualties. The application of air assets was based around a system of command and control that was ‘archaic and ineffective.’<sup>236</sup> Fighter-bombers were utilised to deploy large munitions against guerrilla concentrations, but without any communications with ground units, pilots

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<sup>232</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 39.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Colonel Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 298.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Colonel Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 299.

<sup>235</sup> *Washington Post*, 21 June 1982.

<sup>236</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 5-3.

were essentially blind when it came to targeting. This lack of control over air assets was compounded by ESAF's willingness to employ aerial bombing strategies against civilian areas. The United States had supplied 500-lb bombs for the Salvadoran Air Force,<sup>237</sup> and ESAF was not averse to dropping these weapons on civilian areas. One week prior to the massacre at El Mozote an ESAF plane had delivered two bombs in the vicinity of the village, though no casualties were suffered that time.<sup>238</sup>

Poor command and control policies were also reflected in the chaotic scenes which greeted U.S. advisors when they first encountered the war effort upon their arrival. The Salvadoran military had little self-control when it came to engaging guerrillas. In one bizarre technique, soldiers would clamber into trucks at the first sign of an engagement, tear off up the nearest highway towards the action, only to be cut down by carefully orchestrated guerrilla ambushes. One American noted this was a consistent approach, 'partly out of bravado, and partly for lack of a better solution.'<sup>239</sup> Unfortunately, such an approach produced damaging levels of casualties in the ESAF ranks. Between 1 January 1981 and 5 October 1981, seven of the Army's eighteen brigade/battalion sized units suffered over 10% casualty rates.<sup>240</sup> This was a staggering, and demoralising, level of attrition for a military backed by the United States and fighting a guerrilla force in its own backyard. It fuelled anger towards the guerrillas, contributed to the requirement to deploy untrained soldiers

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<sup>237</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 333.

<sup>238</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 17.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with Colonel Duryea, *El Salvador at War*, p. 317.

<sup>240</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 93.



immediately into combat, and left ESAF weakened in its force deployment across the country.

Military operations in El Salvador were aided by an utter lack of judicial oversight in the country. The justice system was corrupt, ineffectual and completely dependent upon the will of the military. The opening years of the war saw civilian deaths at their highest. In 1981 alone, Christian Legal Aid estimated there were 12,500 civilian deaths.<sup>241</sup> Yet in September 1982, U.S. embassy staff in El Salvador were forced to admit that the highest ranked officer charged and processed through the courts for atrocities was a lieutenant, and that despite their efforts to find quantifiable data to satisfy the curious members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, embassy staff could find no evidence to show that *anyone* in ESAF had been convicted of human rights abuses.<sup>242</sup> Claiming that the lack of data was a jurisdictional issue, relating to the vast array of courts that existed in El Salvador, the embassy personnel were still forced to admit, in the same confidential cable, that future convictions were extremely unlikely for any of the Army members who had actually been charged with human rights abuses.

This is a remarkable state of events, considering that by 24 September 1982, the date of the cable, the level of violence within El Salvador was already staggeringly high, and that a number of El Salvador's most notorious massacres had already occurred – El Mozote, Sumpul River, and Lempa River. Nevertheless, American staff in El Salvador continued to argue that the Salvadoran justice system was operational. The

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<sup>241</sup> *U.N. Truth Commission*, p. 30.

<sup>242</sup> 'Senate Foreign Relations Committee Questions on Human Rights Related Topics', *Confidential Cable San Salvador*, 24 September 1982.

Annual Integrated Assessments of Security Assistance for El Salvador (AIASA), important milestones in the reporting of the status of the war, commented without any apparent sense of incredulity that military personnel were being turned over to judges for various human rights violations. In the AIASA of May 1982, embassy staff stated that since October 1979, three hundred ESAF members had been handed over to judges.<sup>243</sup> The following year's AIASA noted this number was up to four hundred,<sup>244</sup> suggesting between 1982 and 1983 alone some one hundred military personnel had been hauled into courtrooms. This is a remarkably low number, especially when one compares this figure with the previously mentioned 25,000 courts-martial between 1965 and 1969 in Vietnam.

Certification also sustained the sense of rose-tinted optimism. The annual certification process for El Salvador, passed into law in 1981, required the U.S. administration to keep Congress updated on the status of human rights in the country, and represented liberal attempts to force Reagan's government to pay attention to human rights in return for continuing assistance in the war effort.<sup>245</sup> The Reagan administration treated certification with barely concealed contempt. Deane Hinton, who served as Ambassador from 1982 to 1983, derided the process as 'close, in my view, to being unconstitutional' and an attempt by Congress to avoid responsibility for making difficult decisions.<sup>246</sup> The certification reports offer conflicting assessments of progress in El Salvador, often sharply critical of elements

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<sup>243</sup> 'Annual Integrated Assessment of Security Assistance for El Salvador', *Confidential, Cable San Salvador*, 26 May 1982.

<sup>244</sup> 'Annual Integrated Assessment of Security Assistance for El Salvador', *Confidential, Cable San Salvador*, 11 May 1983.

<sup>245</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 132.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with Ambassador Deane Hinton, *El Salvador at War*, p. 400.

of Salvadoran society and government but never losing an ability to predict great progress in future. The July 1982 certification report highlights the ‘substantial steps’ taken by the Minister of Defense, General José Guillermo García, in curbing problems related to ‘violations of citizens’ rights’ and the ‘tangible signs of progress’ with regards to the situation in El Salvador.<sup>247</sup> A year later, in July 1983’s certification report, the embassy again stressed that ‘senior officers are showing greater sensitivity to human rights concerns.’<sup>248</sup>

The problem for American officials, and one which some did indeed recognise, was that successfully prosecuting human rights violators was impossible in a country in which the military had an active stake in the judicial system. A secret Special National Intelligence Estimate in January 1983, barely six months after the previously noted certification report, commented that any progress in human rights was ‘overshadowed by a virtually non-functional criminal justice system that has proved unable to indict and prosecute the accused.’<sup>249</sup> Despite repetitive arguments from the United States government that El Salvador was reforming, it was not until the conviction of two Army officers in 1991, for the November 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests and two women, that guilty ESAF members were successfully brought to justice. Even at this late stage in the conflict, with peace negotiations well under

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<sup>247</sup> ‘[Certification] Report on the Situation in El Salvador with Respect to the Subjects Covered in Section 728(d) of the International Security and Development Act’, *Report*, 27 July 1982.

<sup>248</sup> Report on the Situation in El Salvador with Respect to the Subjects Covered in Section 728(d) and (e) of the International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1981 as Amended, P.L. 97-113, *Non-Classified, Report*, 20 July 1983.

<sup>249</sup> ‘El Salvador: Performance on Certification Issues’, *Secret, Special National Intelligence Estimate*, 14 January 1983.

way, the judge in charge of the trial was so fearful for his safety that he planned to flee the country after announcing the sentence.<sup>250</sup>

Given the derelict state of the justice system in El Salvador, ESAF was comfortable with targeting civilians and non-combatants. In an enlightening account of his meeting with Defense Minister García, Ambassador Hinton noted García's unease with the idea of discipline, something that even Hinton sympathised with as possibly being 'misunderstood and resented' by soldiers only trying to do their job.<sup>251</sup> The ambassador in El Salvador had overall command of the American effort,<sup>252</sup> and if this top United States official was privately communicating his discomfort with strict disciplinary measures for ESAF, it is of little surprise that the Salvadoran military did not take American efforts to curb human rights abuses seriously. This was not only evident in these diplomatic exchanges regarding ESAF's military campaign, but was also noted in Woerner's reluctance to overtly sanction a pacification campaign that would have altered the status quo in El Salvador and negated leftist concerns and demands. Though the American forces advising Salvadoran troops were keen to shift the tactical nature of operations away from a predominantly defensive philosophy, there was little dispute over the objective: the destruction of the guerrilla forces. As in Vietnam, the U.S. Army in El Salvador sought a militarised solution, with Woerner dismissive of population security and pacification programs. Arguing that 'population control measures in and of themselves will not deny the insurgent the

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<sup>250</sup> *Washington Post*, 30 September 1991.

<sup>251</sup> 'The General (Garcia) Who Came To Lunch', *Confidential, Cable*, 9 February 1982.

<sup>252</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 157.

freedom of movement and relative assurance of non-detection',<sup>253</sup> he considered only those programs that are 'absolutely necessary and supported by psychological operation themes' as being worthy of execution.<sup>254</sup>

This reflected the U.S. Army's utterly conventional approach to countering insurgency, which between 1960 and the mid-1980s was the thread that weaved its way from Vietnam to El Salvador. The U.S. and the Salvadoran armies sought to destroy guerrillas as an enemy combatant force, utilising their modern and excessive firepower in ever more indiscriminate ways in a vain effort to kill the insurgents in the field. The tragic consequence of this approach was that atrocity became much more likely. For the U.S. Army in Vietnam, its attritional strategy provided the incentive for a lack of restraint when planning and executing combat operations, and the concurrent dynamics of ineffective military justice, unit disintegration and often ineffective command elements created an excess of pressure that erupted at various locations in short sharp outpourings of violence. My Lai was the culmination of these pressures, but as Sheehan pointed out, 'had they (Task Force Barker) killed just as many over a larger area in a longer period of time and killed impersonally with bombs, shells, rockets, white phosphorus, and napalm, they would have been following the normal pattern of American military behaviour.'<sup>255</sup> Such behaviour was not ordered by the U.S. Army, nor was it universal amongst American forces in the country. However, it was tolerated and it was the natural result of Army doctrine and the combat environment of Vietnam.

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<sup>253</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 163.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid*, p. 162.

<sup>255</sup> Sheehan, *Lie*, p. 690.

In El Salvador, a military already predisposed to violence and convention was given further encouragement by the United States' insistence on a largely militaristic solution to the insurgency. Supplying ESAF with conventional weapons systems, and huge quantities of ammunition, meant that the United States was promoting a form of warfare that was little different from Vietnam a decade earlier. Unfortunately, such materiel and doctrinal support merely added fuel to the existing fire of ESAF's brutal, unprofessional attitude to conducting warfare. A product of history, culture and necessity, ESAF's combat operations targeted civilians in deliberate campaigns of massacre. Unable and unwilling to change its tactics, despite American pressure and protestations over the weaknesses of military solutions to counterinsurgency,<sup>256</sup> ESAF maintained a repressive, brutal policy of slaughter in its attempts to defeat the FMLN.

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<sup>256</sup> Interview with Colonel Carlos Reynaldo López Nuila, *El Salvador at War*, p. 397.

## Chapter 4: Leading to Massacre

‘Someone who had not studied the matter would underestimate the influence of leadership in enabling killing on the battlefield, but those who have been there know better.’<sup>257</sup> - Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman.

Osiel argued that ineffective control over troops often leads to war crimes.<sup>258</sup> Therefore, any understanding of the path to My Lai, El Mozote and other atrocities of the Vietnam and Salvadoran wars must take into account the actions of those in charge of the units who committed these murders. From the very top military leaders right down to the squad and platoon commanders on the ground, command deficiencies represented an important stage in the build up to atrocity. This chapter will study the weaknesses that infected the American and Salvadoran officer corps, arguing that careerism, indiscipline, an unerring devotion to convention and even corruption resulted in a leadership element that was often unsuited to commanding men in the difficult counterinsurgency environment of Vietnam and El Salvador.

Cincinnatus, the anonymous veteran who penned a scathing critique of the American military effort in Vietnam, believed the military’s leaders were of a ‘shockingly low calibre’ during the conflict.<sup>259</sup> This disintegration of the officer corps allowed

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<sup>257</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 143.

<sup>258</sup> Osiel, ‘Obeying Orders’, p. 1029.

<sup>259</sup> Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction – The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army during the Vietnam Era* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), p. 22.

dangerous precedents to go unchecked.<sup>260</sup> Indiscipline, unit disintegration and indiscriminate combat operations began to take hold. This was particularly noticeable in the unwillingness of many leaders to display ethical fortitude in the face of the military's unyielding focus on indiscriminate attrition. Partially this was the result of the Army's institutional shift to a more bureaucratised, market-orientated philosophy, and partly it was a result of personal failures by officers. This study has highlighted the importance of statistical data as a means of conducting the war in Vietnam, and how that fed into the cycle of violence. The officer corps represented the primary conduit through which this notion passed to the soldiers on the ground. They too were affected by this statistical, business-orientated approach to the conflict, although in far greater ways than the average GI.

For a start, officers found themselves under intense pressure to demonstrate qualities that were more akin to office management than command leadership, especially after the appointment of Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense in 1960. Officers began to see a division between their role as a professional in the military, and the job of managing their unit: in McNamara's Army, as officers were gradually required to choose between these two roles, those who opted for the former were frequently set back in their military career.<sup>261</sup> What emerged, as a result, was an officer corps increasingly modelled upon a business. This excessive focus on the career and on the individual relegated military ethics to a secondary place behind the desire to forge ahead and progress up the ladder of opportunity.

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<sup>260</sup> 'Interview with Robert Kreger', 21 February 2006, Robert Kreger Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (16/4/2010).

<sup>261</sup> Gabriel, *To Serve with Honor*, p. 11.



Playing the game in Vietnam required adherence to the statistical criteria of winning the war, as highlighted in the previous chapter. It was argued that mathematical methodologies, such as body counts and contact ratios, fed a soldier's impulse to fire first and ask questions later. For those in charge of these soldiers, similar forces were at work. Indeed, it was the pressure placed upon officers to demonstrate a commitment to this approach to war, and the willingness demonstrated by the officer corps to follow this ideology, that helped create and sustain the immense pressure for the GI on the ground. Officers demonstrated what Gabriel termed a 'pervasive sense of ethical relativism' in conducting the war, primarily as a result of concern for their own careers.<sup>262</sup> Required to show adherence to the Army concept, to the unyielding desire for increasing kill counts, officers took that to mean standards of warfare were to be sacrificed for the greater goal.

The previously discussed 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division is a useful example of this attitude. Not only did Ewell personally regard this approach as a tactical necessity, his command also demonstrated an attitude to the careers of his subordinate commanders that displayed the links between statistics, careerism and combat command. Responding to Ewell's comment that Viet Cong deaths were becoming harder to obtain, his assistant division commander replied that 'brigade commanders aren't', and his junior officers' careers were threatened if they did not meet the kill quotas he demanded.<sup>263</sup> The result of such pressure was the banishment of ethics as a restraint on operations, with commanders in the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry killing a large number of civilians in the course of their operations, as well as risking the lives of American

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>263</sup> Krepinevich, *Army*, p. 204.

troops in the constant quest to make sure their careers were not derailed through lack of commitment to the cause.<sup>264</sup> Such commitment also required the creation of detailed reports on the outcome of an officer's operations and his performance in the field of duty. The reports were absolutely vital to an officer's career.<sup>265</sup> It was common knowledge that a single less-than-perfect report could irreparably damage the career of a young officer.<sup>266</sup> Consequently, leaders were far more concerned with reporting the perfect nature of their unit, and its conduct, than in actually monitoring their force and confronting any issues that might arise. Gabriel points out that such concealment amounted 'at times to the point of criminal behaviour.'<sup>267</sup>

Such an analysis was reflected in the Peers Report's conclusion that 'a dangerously permissive attitude toward the handling and safeguarding of Vietnamese and their property existed within elements of the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade chain of command prior to the Son My operation.'<sup>268</sup> Furthermore, it is clear from the testimony of those involved in Task Force Barker that a number of the command elements of the force were more than happy to let indiscipline infect the unit – for example, with the execution of prisoners.<sup>269</sup> The officer corps was the primary means of imposing discipline and was the first barrier to atrocities driven from below.<sup>270</sup> If My Lai is considered as a result of Task Force Barker's personal desires, for example revenge or aggression,

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid, p. 205.

<sup>265</sup> 'Interview with Bill Paris', (15/4/2010).

<sup>266</sup> Gabriel, *To Serve with Honor*, p. 13.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>268</sup> *Peers Report*, 8-11.

<sup>269</sup> Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York, Viking, 1992), p. 76.

<sup>270</sup> Osiel, 'Obeying Orders', p. 1030.

then the officers' permissive approach to the unit was of absolutely crucial importance in understanding how the massacre could have occurred.

For officers, therefore, the Army during Vietnam offered little incentive to enforce strict discipline within units, nor to play it safe in combat. Nevertheless, command deficiency within the US Army during Vietnam was not simply a product of individual conduct. Powerful institutional factors, which no single officer could hope to resist, also had tremendous importance in creating a dangerously command-deficient environment during the war. One of the most fundamental was the Army's insistence on six month tours for its officers. Such tours, whilst providing the maximum number of officers with combat experience, were an utter disaster for the cohesion and combat effectiveness of the service. Officers were rotated away from their soldiers just as they had developed experience of the conflict and a measure of respect and trust from the GIs.<sup>271</sup> Institutional memory within the Army in Vietnam was almost non-existent, and created a force that Sheehan considered to be geared towards the 'unlearning rather than the learning of lessons.'<sup>272</sup> Lacking a coherent, sustained experience, rooted in a stable, durable officer corps, the Army struggled in terms of tactics and strategy. Such a struggle undermined performance. Poor performance led to frustration, and frustration helped lead to atrocity, when soldiers, tired of endlessly being ambushed and firing at shadows released their pent up anger on definite, albeit, civilian targets.

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<sup>271</sup> Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* (London, Corgi Books, 2002), p. 405.

<sup>272</sup> Sheehan, *Lie*, p. 650.

In El Salvador, where so much of the line between politics and the military was often blurred, even non-existent, the importance of the officer corps in the conduct of the violence directed against the left also was of crucial importance. An examination of the officer corps of ESAF leads to the conclusion that its fractious nature, inward-looking philosophy, and own self interests, led to an attitude of brutality and repression towards those who it regarded as opposition. It is abundantly clear that specific individuals within the officer corps were at the very forefront of the repression and brutality that defined the war. Roberto D'Aubuisson, who consistently confounded his domestic opponents and the best efforts of the American diplomatic corps to reduce his importance, led the way. American officials were in no doubt as to the role he played in the violence within El Salvador, as evidenced by a CIA National Foreign Assessment Centre briefing for Vice President George Bush in March 1981, in which D'Aubuisson's role as the 'principal henchman' of rich landowners was highlighted.<sup>273</sup> Robert E. White, the American Ambassador to El Salvador from March 1980 to February 1981, went as far as to denounce D'Aubuisson as a 'pathological killer.'<sup>274</sup> D'Aubuisson was the protégé of José Alberto 'Chele' Medrano who, as the first commanding officer of the Salvadoran National Special Services Agency (ANSESAL), had been instrumental in the foundation of the Democratic Nationalist Organisation (ORDEN). ORDEN, meaning 'order', was at the very heart of the repressive security apparatus that spread the violence throughout El Salvador from the 1960s onwards.

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<sup>273</sup> 'El Salvador: The Right Wing', *Classification Excised, Intelligence Memorandum*, 18 March 1981.

<sup>274</sup> *New York Times*, 19 February 1982.

Interestingly, Medrano, who was on the CIA payroll during this period, had been sent to Vietnam on a three month tour of American operations during the war there.<sup>275</sup> This trip took place during what McClintock regards as one of the most important stages of the development of El Salvador's repressive security apparatus: a period commencing from 1960 in which US military policies were, for the first time, integrated into El Salvador's security programs.<sup>276</sup> These were directed mainly at the creation of paramilitary forces, such as ORDEN, rather than at the ESAF. Thus, Medrano's time in Vietnam does not necessarily seem to have a correlation with the warfare adopted by the Salvadorans in their own fight against insurgents. In fact, it appears to have been a remarkably contrary approach. Rather than taking lessons from the US Army's massed firepower approach to the matter, Medrano adopted a program of grass-roots paramilitary force. In any case, Medrano's journey to Vietnam would likely have demonstrated to him just how focused the U.S. was on countering communist insurgencies around the world, and he would no doubt have found a new, more globalised interpretation of his own anti-communism to take back to El Salvador.

Medrano's 1972 political campaign was assisted by a number of officers who would later go on to be intimately involved with the violence directed at civilians. Not only did D'Aubuisson aid the campaign, but Domingo Monterrosa offered his services. Monterrosa, as commanding officer of the Atlacatl Battalion during the 1980s, would lead this unit through a string of barbaric operations, including El Mozote. He was the epitome of the Salvadoran military's officer corps in terms of its strategic

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<sup>275</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 81.

<sup>276</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 196.

understanding of the war. Questioned by reporters following a ten day sweep through Chalatenango department in 1982, Monterrosa summed up the officer corps' point of view on the nature of the combat when he acknowledged that it was 'natural that there were a series of people killed, some without weapons, including some women, and I understand some children.'<sup>277</sup> Monterrosa was particularly stringent on his unit's willingness to kill children, arguing a year later that 'once you have seen several 12-year olds in action, you can no longer dismiss the possibility that any 12 year old may be a guerrilla.'<sup>278</sup>

These officers, however, were not unique. Their actions were mirrored by many of their colleagues, with varying degrees of intensity, and were shaped by a variety of historical and cultural precedents that often took on a much greater resonance than any US influence gleaned during officer training courses at US military installations and academies. Indeed, the Salvadoran officer clique is testament to the inability of American advisors and diplomats to impart extensive influence on Salvadoran military policy. As a strongly conservative organisation,<sup>279</sup> ESAF's officer corps was at the very heart of the violence that was directed at civilians during, and prior to, the civil war. Anti-communist zeal had been enshrined within the institution for decades, and the corps regarded itself as the last bastion against communists, reformists and other opposition forces. Indeed, the creed of the corps neatly encapsulated this self-aggrandisement - 'the Republic shall live as long as the Army shall live.'<sup>280</sup> Over the

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<sup>277</sup> *Washington Post*, 10 June 1982.

<sup>278</sup> *Guardian*, 22 November 1983.

<sup>279</sup> 'El Salvador: Right Wing', *Classification Excised, Intelligence Memorandum*, 18 March 1981.

<sup>280</sup> Bosch, *Salvadoran Officer Corps*, p. 3.

course of many years this intoxicating sense of national worth had been burned into the minds of officer recruits and, though an increasingly reformist cabal of junior officers began to emerge in the late 1970s, the overwhelming majority in combat commands and important, influential government positions were of the hard-line, conservative variety.

As noted in the previous chapters, fears for the future of the armed forces as an institution fed the violence that wracked El Salvador. It was the officer corps, being the most heavily invested in the organisation, which led the defence of the military through brutality directed against opponents. General José Guillermo García, Minister of Defense from the coup in 1979 to 1984, proclaimed that the reformists' goal was 'the destruction of the armed forces' and declared his mission was 'to defend the armed institution in order to avoid its collapse.'<sup>281</sup> García's successor, General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova similarly believed his mission was to 'save this country and our own institution – the Army.'<sup>282</sup>

These comments reveal the self-serving, paranoid atmosphere that pervaded the officer corps. Given the seniority of these members of ESAF, it can be argued that the violence directed at civilians as a means of protecting the officer corps and the military as a whole was a top-down process, emanating and gaining credibility from the very upper echelons of the officer corps. Conservative officers saw opponents everywhere in society,<sup>283</sup> and an attitude of defiance, of bravely countering

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<sup>281</sup> Interview with General José Guillermo García, *El Salvador at War*, p. 31.

<sup>282</sup> Interview with General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, *El Salvador at War*, p. 219.

<sup>283</sup> Interview with General Jamie Abdul Gutiérrez, *El Salvador at War*, p. 43.

reformists and communists at every turn, gave officers the justification for the violence they unleashed upon the civilian population.

This argument suggests a classical interpretation of the violence, resting on the political science theory that repression was codified around a functionalist response by the military to its own safety, and by default, that of the country too. Such an analysis has been queried by recent studies of El Salvador which seek a more comprehensive examination of the roots of the state violence.<sup>284</sup> Stanley argued that such functionalist explanations, resting on modernisation theory, are insufficient in explaining the violence, and that only by examining the multitude of relationships between state actors, elites, economies and institutions can a more balanced interpretation of state violence be developed.<sup>285</sup> Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the impact of the officer corps' own insecurity and its role in creating great impetus for extreme violence.

A classic instrumentalist response to a security threat does not wholly explain away the violence. The links between officers and the violence of the military campaign were the product of a number of additional factors, all of which contributed to the brutality of repression. For decades, the officer corps had utilised a military academy based extensively on an annual class system.<sup>286</sup> At the Capitán General Gerardo Barrios military academy, each year's intake would develop close personal ties; relationships that were incredibly powerful, durable and influential. An officer's

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<sup>284</sup> Lauria-Santiago, 'Culture and Politics', p. 87.

<sup>285</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 13.

<sup>286</sup> Richard Millet, 'The Central America Militaries' in Abraham F. Lowenthal and J. Samuel Fitch (eds.), *Armies and Politics in Latin America* (New York, Holmes & Meier, 1986), p. 209.



annual class – his *tanda* – became the most powerful influence over his actions in his future military career. Each *tanda* produced a sense of loyalty that was of such stern durability that an officer would not contemplate the thought of denouncing another classmate for abusing his command position, or for negligible oversight of a military operation in the field. The Woerner Report noted that such loyalty was so intense that it possibly exceeded an officer's anti-communist zeal, and indeed, his patriotic concern for El Salvador.<sup>287</sup>

This notion of loyalty to one's classmates, rather than to a grander notion of the state, allowed a wildly permissive attitude towards the application of violence. Imbued with a sense of unaccountability, officers considered themselves beyond the law. Bosch dates this system back to the Spanish conquistadors. In his opinion, the sense of entitlement that characterised the behaviour of the officer corps was a product of the *fuero military*: the Spanish monarchs' authorisation allowing the military to exist in a state beyond the criminal and civil courts of the time.<sup>288</sup> Just as the *Matanza* influenced contemporary Salvadoran tactics, so too did this earlier precedent have an impact centuries later in the 1970s and 1980s. The lack of judicial overview of Army strategy, noted in the previous chapter, was testament to this. Seeking to prosecute a fellow member of the officer corps, or even accusing a comrade of negative actions, was simply unthinkable for an officer corps predicated on the basis of loyalty to the institution above all else.

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<sup>287</sup> Woerner Report, p. 42.

<sup>288</sup> Bosch, *Salvadoran Officer Corps*, p. 3.

The *tanda* system also had an incredibly destabilising effect on the governance of El Salvador and produced a succession of coups and fractious juntas. *Tandas* were central to the organisation of the coups and conspiracies that plagued the Salvadoran political landscape as the 1970s drew to a close. Declassified U.S. embassy cables concerning the possibility of coups in the late 1970s show the importance of the *tanda* as a basis for action in El Salvador. A 5 June 1979 secret cable commented on the latest coup developments revolving around ‘informal conversation between several majors in the 1963 military class.’<sup>289</sup> The 1963 *tanda* was a particularly powerful influence within ESAF, a fact not lost on the embassy, which specifically mentioned this *tanda* in an analysis of the political situation in the aftermath of the 1979 coup.<sup>290</sup> With a membership roster that included some of the most notorious officers of the period, including Roberto D’Aubuisson, the escalation of violence in the country as this group increased its influence on the political landscape cannot be seen as mere coincidence.

Woerner argued that the armed forces had ‘a degree of resiliency made possible by its [ESAF’s] remarkable institutional cohesion.’<sup>291</sup> This analysis was a deep misunderstanding of the reality of the situation. The officer corps, though sharing many of the same goals, was deeply divided over the conduct of the war against the insurgents, and conservative elements of the corps would utilise their alliances to marginalise those officers who favoured reform, and promote a sweeping repression. Over the twentieth-century, a labyrinthine political structure created a bizarre system

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<sup>289</sup> ‘Salvadoran Military Plans for Possible Coup, *Secret, Cable*, 5 June 1979.

<sup>290</sup> ‘Current Politics within the Armed Forces’, *Classification Excised, Cable*, 3 November 1980.

<sup>291</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 42.

of command that revolved around the *tandas*, anti-incentives and Machiavellian manoeuvrings.<sup>292</sup> The primary example of this was the way in which command positions were allocated. More powerful officers centred their operations and networking on San Salvador, strengthening their position through the execution of politically powerful posts, usually in Intelligence. The least competent officers, or those who failed in the politically charged climate of San Salvador, were quickly dismissed to the isolation of rural departmental commands. American observers were damning in their assessment of the majority of combat commanders, with Colonel Waghelstein believing that as of March 1982, when the fight against the insurgents was at its most difficult stage, only two out of the fourteen departmental commanders were 'worth a damn.'<sup>293</sup> In a dark twist, and against all logic, the least able became the most important in prosecuting the actual war effort.<sup>294</sup>

The more politically astute officers not only secured their position through the marginalisation of weak officers, they also subverted the legitimacy of reformist officers by assigning them to dangerous locations. As the 1979 reformist junta began to lose power under an onslaught of careful political manoeuvring by hardliners, junior officers who advocated tolerance or restraint, or those who were particularly stringent in their adherence to human rights regulations, were assigned to combat theatres in which repression was the norm. Mena Sandoval, a reformist officer who defected to the FMLN in disgust at the Army's behaviour, stated that he was deployed to a combat command and pressured to commit massacres, whilst Amilcar

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<sup>292</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 39.

<sup>293</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 196.

<sup>294</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 39.

Molina Panameño, a leading member of the reformist faction, was transferred into the National Police and placed in a notorious death squad unit.<sup>295</sup> Such actions demonstrated the lengths to which conservative elements of the officer corps would go to make sure there were no obstructions to their strategy for ‘saving the country’. Reformists and opponents were faced with the stark choice of giving up or facing deployment to a dangerous, rural combat position. Once on assignment, it was highly likely that an officer would come into contact with brutality that would tarnish his reputation in the unlikely event of any future attempt at reform, and leave him open to the kind of prosecution he himself wanted for those guilty of war crimes.

Without a cohesive, unified officer corps, departmental commanders and their underlings were free to profit from the violence in more personal ways. Studies of El Salvador in the early 1980s note that there was no centralised point of authority directing combat commands,<sup>296</sup> thus officers exercised extensive autonomy. During the build up to the civil war, as violence intensified, ESAF officers sought to take advantage of their independence by using the fear of violence, and violence itself, in order to increase their wealth. Kidnapping and private protection were used by ESAF officers as means of garnering huge wealth. Major Guillermo Roeder combined the two: invoicing wealthy clients for protection services rendered by his Army unit, he would then kidnap these very clients for ransom, thereby securing even greater profit from the enterprise.<sup>297</sup> It is testament to the magnitude of Roeder’s operation that it eventually provoked the anger of the National Police who arrested Roeder in 1982,

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<sup>295</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 207.

<sup>296</sup> Lauria-Santiago, ‘Culture and Politics’, p. 95.

<sup>297</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 117.

charging him with utilising his security and protection service to carry out crimes in the guise of both leftist and rightist extremists.<sup>298</sup>

In the U.S. embassy's opinion, Roeder's case was 'unique in Salvadoran history' given his rank and the extent of the charges brought against him.<sup>299</sup> But in reality Roeder's case was only unique in the sense that he was brought up on charges. According to an embassy cable from San Salvador to the Department of State, Salvadoran expatriate oligarchs living in Miami were convinced that other senior members of the officer corps were not only knowledgeable about kidnappings and associated violence, but were also profiting from it themselves. The embassy's political officer met with a group of fifteen Salvadoran expatriates in Florida – a group characterised as supporters of D'Aubuisson and the National Republican Alliance (ARENA), but who had recently lost faith due to the lack of progress in returning El Salvador to its previous 'glory'. These Salvadorans, interestingly, directed their ire at the military, and in particular, at 'a corrupt and venal clique of officers' who had authorised and planned the majority of kidnappings in the period 1972-1981. Though Roeder had been the only one discovered so far, these oligarchs claimed even senior figures such as ex-Chief of Staff Carlos Alberto Rodriguez, ex-ANSESAL director Francisco Moran and even Minister of Defense Guillermo Garcia had knowledge of, and had profited from, this campaign of orchestrated kidnapping and violence.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> 'Violence Week in Review: January 23-29', *Unclassified, Cable San Salvador*, 5 February 1982.

<sup>299</sup> 'Violence Week in Review: January 23-29', *Unclassified, Cable San Salvador*, 5 February 1982.

<sup>300</sup> 'Miami Oligarchs', *Confidential, Cable*, 27 November 1982.

Violence and profit were therefore inextricably linked within the workings of the Salvadoran officer corps. Far from being a product of isolated ‘bad apples’, profiteering from the violence of the counterinsurgency campaign was simply part of the unprofessionalism that permeated the leadership element of ESAF, all the way to the very top of the command chain. Criticism of the officer corps by disgruntled expatriates might be seen as a means of gaining some measure of revenge over those that the oligarchs regarded as being ineffective in the restoration of the status quo. However, it was this group of wealthy businessmen who had some of the most detailed knowledge of just how unprofessional the officer corps was. An examination of U.S. cable traffic from the embassy in San Salvador to the government in Washington D.C reveals a handful of documents outlining conversations held between political staff from the embassy and Salvadoran oligarchs, all of which highlight in some detail links between the officer corps and this wealthy community sitting out the war abroad, mostly in Miami.

This is one reason why Stanley defined the country, in the title of his major work, as *The Protection Racket State*. Examples of personal gain fuelling the bloodshed were all too common, and reflected the long interaction between the economic elites of the nation, and the officer corps. Stanley argues persuasively that ESAF, led by its officer element, believed it merited the right to lead the nation and profit from this leadership, in return for deploying its military might against those who threatened the small group of economic elites who had accrued vast wealth from the agrarian system.<sup>301</sup> As such, when the FMLN began to call for moderation and a system of agricultural and political reform which threatened this status quo, ESAF was quick to

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<sup>301</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 6.

employ its resources in deliberate campaigns against those who might support such a cause.

During the 1980s, some of these campaigns of violence and brutality were financed by a cabal of wealthy Salvadoran expatriates. Residing in Miami, these conservative elites provided financial support and organisational direction to right-wing death squads in an attempt to terrorise the business community remaining in El Salvador into opposing the reformist junta of 1979. Provided with explicit details on this ‘Millionaires Murder Inc.’ in January 1981, the U.S. embassy in San Salvador was dismayed to find that the brutality of the Salvadoran war had direct links to the mainland United States.<sup>302</sup> Their informant, ‘a highly respected Salvadoran lawyer’ who was known, and well regarded, by the American diplomatic presence in El Salvador, notified the embassy that this group of six Salvadoran millionaires had not only targeted the Salvadoran business community, but had probably orchestrated the murder of two American citizens, employees of the American Institute for Free Labor Development, who had been gunned down in the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador on 3 January 1981.<sup>303</sup> This information was later supported by a security force member who, in a conversation with the embassy’s political officer, confirmed that a Miami resident had provided 100,000 *colones* of funding for the hit.<sup>304</sup>

The 6 January 1981 cable cited above is one of the most important documents to illuminate the links between Salvadoran oligarchs, the officer corps, illegal death

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<sup>302</sup> ‘‘Millionaires’ Murder Inc.?’, *Secret, Cable*, 6 January 1981.

<sup>303</sup> ‘‘Millionaires’ Murder Inc.?’, *Secret, Cable*, 6 January 1981.

<sup>304</sup> ‘Security Force Officer Comments on Sheraton Murders, Other Rightist Violence’, *Secret, Cable*, 23 April 1981.

squads and the brutality sweeping the country at the onset of the 1980s. The level of detail within the document suggests that the source was indeed knowledgeable about the workings of the so-called Miami Six, and that the embassy was convinced of the veracity of the accusations. The embassy was particularly concerned with the links between the millionaires and Roberto D'Aubuisson who, as the millionaires' agent in El Salvador, directly orchestrated the violence on behalf of the wealthy. Their goal was simple, and neatly encapsulated the intra-Salvadoran dynamics that created and maintained the violence of the war. In the oligarchs' opinion, a *limpeza*, or 'cleansing', was to occur, and with these hundreds of thousands of deaths a pro-oligarchic state would be reconstituted in the country.

Crucially, the message points out the toxic relationship between private interests and the officer corps. The Miami-based Salvadorans were bribing officers to carry out the violence necessary to cleanse the country of threats to their business life.<sup>305</sup> With D'Aubuisson as their agent, they were utilising the officer corps in order to maximise their ability to direct the violence. It is worth noting the utter dismay the embassy felt upon hearing corroboration of accusations they had previously communicated to the Department of State. In a scathingly critical closing remark the cable notes that, over the last ten months, a number of American officials had knowledge of this operation. It was, in the eyes of the embassy,

'unacceptable that such an operation is guided from a major American city and that nothing can be done to stop it before another American official or contract employee is murdered here. We are unaware of any steps to investigate the

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<sup>305</sup> '“Millionaires’ Murder Inc.?”', *Secret, Cable*, 6 January 1981.



information on this operation that has been provided by the embassy in the past.

We believe steps must be taken immediately to get to the bottom of these charges and that, if proven, the guilty should be prosecuted to the limits of U.S.

law.<sup>306</sup>

Such vehement criticism of its own government demonstrates a second argument relevant to the overall discussion. Far from being a unified effort from the embassy, the Department of State in Washington and the military component of American assistance, US policy in El Salvador was subject to incredibly diverse dynamics which often pushed and pulled in many directions, usually to the detriment of human rights policy. In this case, it is clear that the embassy regarded progress in curbing the violence as being hampered by other sections of the foreign policy apparatus. The subsequent investigation by the Department of Justice was marred by inaction and disinterest,<sup>307</sup> suggesting that higher powers in Washington were less than keen to enquire into the matter and seek the charges and prosecutions that the embassy in El Salvador demanded. This certainly backs up the claim made by Ambassador White that prior to Reagan's inauguration, a 'transition team' visited the country in order to make clear that human rights were about to become a secondary issue to the overall objective of defeating the insurgency.<sup>308</sup>

Close relationships between oligarchs and officers were not unusual in El Salvador.

In fact, the expansion of ORDEN was linked with the agrarian elite. Medrano and

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<sup>306</sup> '“Millionaires’ Murder Inc.?”', *Secret, Cable*, 6 January 1981.

<sup>307</sup> 'Investigation of Domestic Support for Violence in El Salvador', *Confidential Memorandum*, 8 December 1983.

<sup>308</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 215.

then President Fidel Sánchez Hernández had deliberately appealed to the nation's wealthy farming families to finance the escalation in ORDEN's capabilities.<sup>309</sup> The oligarchs escalated this involvement in the violence during the latter 1970s. The elites had sought in the last few years of the 1970s a means of actively directing combat troops against their foes. Their solution was to engage with the junior officer corps, bribing these men with lucrative, albeit shady, employment opportunities. In doing so, they sought to garner influence, and develop relationships, with those soldiers who would actually command combat troops in the field in subsequent years.<sup>310</sup>

By the time the civil war erupted, a number of combat leaders had close ties to the elite segment of Salvadoran society, and utilised their command positions to engage in brutal operations targeting opponents and reforms. For example, Colonel Sigfrido Ochoa, a close associate of D'Aubuisson and the extreme right in the country, was particularly well known as an opponent of land reform, and actively obstructed its implementation.<sup>311</sup> In another case, a massacre in Sonsonate province in February 1983 was linked to a dispute between a farm holder and peasant workers from a neighbouring farm. The farmer notified the local battalion commander who personally directed his own troops to round up eighteen of the peasants, subsequently executing them with their hands tied.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 206.

<sup>310</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 121.

<sup>311</sup> McClintock, *American Connection*, p. 316.

<sup>312</sup> *New York Times*, 24 July 1983.

Therefore, the role of the officer corps in targeting violence at opponents of the regime in El Salvador was not merely based upon their own stringent anti-communism, or even on a purely military doctrine. Close ties to the economic elites of the country had created an officer corps that gained wealth and power from safeguarding the interests of these very elites. Stanley, having interviewed a number of US Military Group and Salvadoran officers from the period, noted the perception amongst some of these American officers that the Salvadoran officer corps was so wedded to this ability to garner wealth from the violence that they were deliberately seeking to maintain a state of war.<sup>313</sup>

Such analysis was, unfortunately, lacking from the majority of American officials who had contact with the Salvadoran officer corps. Over the period, Salvadoran officers were able, in Stanley's words, to 'manipulate, sweet-talk, mislead, and betray their U.S patrons with panache and impunity'.<sup>314</sup> It was the senior officers in ESAF who had the most success here, and their deceit and manipulation of American officials was a crucial component in not only allowing the violence to continue, but to escalate as well.

In truth, American diplomatic staff and military personnel were more than willing to overlook the officer corps' actions. Unwilling to put pressure on their allies in the fight against communism, American staff consistently maintained faultless optimism in public, and when doubts emerged in private they failed to act decisively. Ambassador after ambassador interacted with the senior officer corps yet failed to

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<sup>313</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, p. 231.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

achieve any meaningful action on human rights violations. Certainly the Reagan administration was less inclined to move against the officers, going as far as to remove its own embassy staff in an effort to halt criticism of ESAF's leaders.<sup>315</sup> However even more liberal embassy officials under Carter, such as Ambassador Robert White, were ineffective in halting the murderous campaign of the officer corps.

Even the deaths of American citizens, as at the Sheraton or the churchwomen raped and murdered in December 1980, did not affect the willingness of U.S. officials to work with the officer corps. American officials suspected the military had, at the very least, covered up the case of the churchwomen,<sup>316</sup> but the U.S. was unwilling to jettison the officer corps or allow the military to disintegrate. Even damning assessments of officers themselves did not reduce American assistance. D'Aubuisson was recognised by American intelligence officials as 'egocentric and reckless',<sup>317</sup> whilst García was seen as remarkably duplicitous by Ambassador Deane Hinton.<sup>318</sup> However, combat officers who demonstrated aggression in the field were praised profusely by U.S. military and diplomatic officials, notwithstanding that these officers were commanding units that often had appalling human rights records. Monterrosa was 'a hotshot strategist' in the eyes of Colonel John Cash, the US military attaché, and a man who Cash would 'put up against any American

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<sup>315</sup> *Washington Post*, 2 February 1981.

<sup>316</sup> *Washington Post*, 6 December 1980.

<sup>317</sup> 'El Salvador: The Right Wing', *Classification Excised, Intelligence Memorandum*, 18 March 1981.

<sup>318</sup> 'The General (Garcia) Who Came for Lunch', *Confidential, Cable*, 9 February 1982.

hotshot.’<sup>319</sup> Ochoa was also highly regarded by American advisors, who saw him as a commander in their mould.<sup>320</sup> The actions of the Atlacatl under Monterrosa and Ochoa’s links to D’Aubuisson’s brutality did not seem to have much of an effect on the American opinion in the country.

Secure in the knowledge that their American patrons were willing to look the other way, the Salvadoran officer corps carried out murder and massacre as national policy. Their role in determining this policy was absolute, for without a functioning NCO element to the military, operations were personally directed by senior officers. This complete lack of effective NCO leadership was a significant problem for American officials, who believed an effective NCO corps could help professionalise the military and redress the imbalance in the relationship between soldiers and their leaders which produced critical problems in the effectiveness of the armed forces.<sup>321</sup> Crucially, without a proper NCO corps, senior officers could take advantage of the situation and enforce their whims on enlisted troops who, through tradition and training, were beholden to the wishes of their senior commanders.

After a fact-finding trip to the country in July 1981, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Francis J. West, noted the important socio-cultural determinants behind the military’s reluctance to create and maintain a functional Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) group. Noting the class distinction that existed in the armed forces, West asserted that ‘the officer expects the soldier to

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with Colonel John Cash, *El Salvador at War*, p. 212.

<sup>320</sup> *Washington Post*, 21 June 1982.

<sup>321</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 130.

give complete obedience and to show zero initiative; the soldier expects the officer to make all the decisions and to take care of him.’<sup>322</sup>

This class prejudice certainly could have played a role. The majority of enlisted men were from the poorer element of Salvadoran society, whereas officers tended to join the institution from the middle class.<sup>323</sup> Given the historical animosity between these two sectors of society, officers often adopted harsh attitudes toward their men. American advisors considered the treatment of enlisted men by their officers as extremely poor.<sup>324</sup> However, perhaps more importantly, NCO’s were viewed with suspicion by officers because of the interference they would have in the direction of operations. As the Woerner Report noted, a professional NCO corps was against ‘the traditional leadership attitudes, institutional norms, and operational procedures of the Armed Force.’<sup>325</sup> This was apparent at El Mozote, where a number of higher echelon officers were involved on the ground during the course of the operation. It would seem, judging by the testimony of one of the few survivors of the massacre, Rufina Amaya, that the course of the massacre was altered following the arrival, and departure, of senior officers who visited the site during the day. It was only after the visit of senior leaders that the killings began.<sup>326</sup>

This highlights the chaos of El Salvador’s war. In some cases, combat operations were directly orchestrated on the scene by conservative hardliners. These

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<sup>322</sup> ‘Trip Report to El Salvador – 9-11 July 1981’, *Classification Excised, Report*, 13 July 1981.

<sup>323</sup> Bosch, *Salvadoran Officer Corps*, p. 3.

<sup>324</sup> Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, p. 98.

<sup>325</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 100.

<sup>326</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 68.

conservative leaders had the closest ties to the economic elites and the firebrand officials who employed Cold War rhetoric in their exhortations against the insurgents. In other cases, however, the relegation of tactically ineffective, and politically weak, rivals to combat commands meant some operations were executed with a level of incompetence that created grave danger for civilians caught in the line of fire. In both cases, the marginalisation of reformist officers allowed no limitations on the behaviour of troops in the field.

The officer corps of both the U.S. Army in Vietnam and ESAF in El Salvador's civil war must take a great deal of the responsibility for the actions of their troops in committing massacre and murder. In each case a tainted sense of professionalism led to a willingness to tolerate, promote and demand tactics that placed civilians in the firing line. In Vietnam, the U.S. Army suffered from its own extreme careerism. In placing an officer's managerial qualities above combat determinants the Army added additional momentum to the damaging statistical approach to warfare that was already being waged. In denying officers a chance to gain long term exposure to the problems of the war by recalling them from combat commands after six months, the Army created patchwork units whose tactical knowledge was diluted every time an officer left. In certain units, like the Americal and Tiger Force, officers were explicitly to blame for failing to adequately enforce discipline and professionalism. The Peers Report argued that 'the need for professional leadership, mature judgement, sound analytical decisions, and effective control of combat actions was clearly evident' with regards to warfare in Vietnam,<sup>327</sup> but it is equally as clear that often these requirements were entirely lacking.

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<sup>327</sup> *Peers Report*, p. 9-22.

In El Salvador, the leadership component of ESAF presented a dichotomy. In one sense it had a staggeringly inflated sense of its own professional status. By placing the survival of the institution above the security of the nation, and certainly well above the safety of the population, ESAF's officer corps regarded the violence they unleashed on civilians as justified. However, leaders within ESAF, both combat and non-combat, also embodied a remarkable level of unprofessionalism. Through convention, ESAF's officers had come to occupy an elite position with El Salvador's polarised society. Ideological links between conservatism and the officer corps were deeply entrenched, and made explicit in the lucrative financial relationships between many hard-line officers and Salvadoran businessmen, land owners and those with an interest in preserving the status quo. Consequently, in utilising their combat forces for the personal gain of others, as well as for their own, officers took on a huge degree of responsibility for the slaughter that was inflicted upon civilians who represented a threat to El Salvador's capitalist-military state.

Officers in Vietnam and El Salvador had the responsibility to oversee combat operations in an incredibly difficult, dangerous combat environment. Many of them failed to do this adequately, creating an environment in which massacre was more likely to occur and in which civilian deaths could often be subsumed into the general level of violence attained in prosecuting the war. In some cases, officers actively sought the destruction of civilian communities. Though Vietnam had few recorded cases of such activity, it is clear that the actions of the Americal and Tiger Force were greatly dependent on orders received by commanding officers. In El Salvador, murder and massacre was often orchestrated at the behest of officers, or in some



cases, by utilising officers as proxies between combat units and oligarchic hardliners. In all cases, soldiers within the military establishment, with its emphasis on loyalty, decisiveness and obedience, found their limitations against atrocity reduced as a result of their officers' command deficiencies.

'Never underestimate the power of the need to obey.'<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 146.

## Chapter 5: Face to Face with Atrocity

‘You kill a gook, there was nothing to it.’<sup>329</sup> – Anonymous Vietnam veteran.

The soldiers who killed civilians in Vietnam and El Salvador were the product of their environment in many respects. As we have seen, the training they underwent, the conduct of the wars in which they fought, and the leadership they served under were all powerful factors in their journey towards atrocity. Yet their actions in slaughtering civilians were not only derived from external factors: soldiers were also influenced by the emotional turbulence of warfare. Their reaction to the immediate environment into which they were placed on operations, in addition to their response to cultural and social dynamics playing out around them, contributed greatly to the way they interacted with civilians. This final chapter will examine the relationship between civilians and soldiers in Vietnam and El Salvador, asking how behavioural, cultural, geographic and historical processes produced such a schism between civilians and soldiers.

It is a remarkable fact that so many of the personal motivations involved in the slaughter of civilians in Vietnam and El Salvador were shared by soldiers from each war. The interaction between civilians and soldiers in each conflict was characterised in many cases by maltreatment, abuse and unrestrained violence by soldiers. Those who murdered at My Lai or at El Mozote shared a similar low opinion of civilians in

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<sup>329</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 51.

these communities. This disregard for civilian life was the common denominator that tied together all those who murdered civilians, be it in Vietnam or El Salvador.

Civilians were one of the most important variables in both wars. In Vietnam, the indigenous population affected every facet of the war for American soldiers.<sup>330</sup> Not only were American combat operations frequently mounted within Vietnamese communities, but civilians were also a supply of cheap and plentiful labour for American forces in the country, and were to be found in vast numbers at military bases throughout the country. At Chu Lai, for example, hundreds, possibly thousands, of native Vietnamese worked to maintain the smooth running of the Marine Corps facility.<sup>331</sup> Thus, not only did American soldiers interact with the Vietnamese on their combat operations, but they were also dealing with them on their 'down-time' at supposedly secure posts. In El Salvador, civilians were also an integral aspect of the conflict. Though not required to provide the kind of logistical support as in Vietnam, the population interacted frequently with ESAF units. Combat operations were often executed in the vicinity of communities, and regional garrisons – *cuartels* – were placed in rural towns. Consequently, civilians were a common sight for troops, with ESAF patrols moving through communities as part of their anti-guerrilla sweeps.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993), p. 219.

<sup>331</sup> 'Interview with David W. Taylor', 5 April 2005, David Taylor Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (16/4/2010).

<sup>332</sup> *New York Times*, 13 July 1981.

With civilians an ever-present factor, it was incumbent upon the leadership of both the American military in Vietnam and ESAF in their own country to educate their troops as to the appropriate means of behaving around civilians. Though this might have been achieved through the correct instruction in human rights legislation, it should also have been based greatly around an appreciation of cultural and social norms in the communities within which military forces operated during the two conflicts. In both cases, soldiers received little to no education in the ways of the population they were supposed to be defending.

Vietnam represented a culture shock for American troops. Soldiers came into contact with a society almost entirely opposite to their experience of life back in the United States. They were amazed at the apparent poverty and squalor of the Vietnamese population, and instinctively compared the nature of society in this new world to the culture of their homeland.<sup>333</sup> Though surprise was natural, ignorance contributed greatly, and those with a more worldly view were deeply critical of their comrades who adopted westernised superiority in their opinion of Vietnam and its population.<sup>334</sup>

Bergerud has claimed that Vietnam was one of the only wars in American history in which U.S. soldiers were not adequately informed about their allies.<sup>335</sup> In reality, Vietnam represented the continuation of a pattern of ignorance. Though American servicemen based in England during World War II, for example, were given an

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<sup>333</sup> Bernard Edelman (ed.), *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1985), p. 111.

<sup>334</sup> 'Interview with Antoine Roy', (15/4/2010).

<sup>335</sup> Bergerud, *Red Thunder*, p. 221.

excellent and rigorous education in local customs,<sup>336</sup> U.S. military efforts in the past had suffered from a poor understanding of indigenous peoples.<sup>337</sup> This continued in Vietnam, despite the additional complexities of conducting actual combat operations within local communities and the linguistic barriers between Americans and Vietnamese.

Even the Army's advisor program suffered from a startling failure to educate its members sufficiently before they were sent to Vietnam. These advisors, who represented the marginalised pacification component of American strategy in Vietnam, had particularly frequent contact with the Vietnamese. Yet the language training provided by the Army was too brief for a language as complex and nuanced as Vietnamese.<sup>338</sup> It left soldiers relying on interpreters, and the single year tour of duty for advisors provided little opportunity for these troops to learn in-country.<sup>339</sup> Ramsey summarised the advisor orientation program as, at best, creating a perfunctory knowledge of cultural differences.<sup>340</sup> It offered no assistance in bridging the gulf between the two vastly different societies.

If advisors were inadequately prepared for the cultural shock of Vietnam, what hope did the basic infantry soldier have? Orientation for foot soldiers in Vietnam was sparse at best, though it is interesting to note that the Americal Division was one of

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<sup>336</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (London, Pocket Books, 2001), p. 44.

<sup>337</sup> For an example, see Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, The United States, and the Philippines* (North Carolina, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>338</sup> Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, p. 46.

<sup>339</sup> Lewy, *American in Vietnam*, p. 168.

<sup>340</sup> Ramsey, *Advising Indigenous Forces*, p. 44.

the few units in Vietnam to have a brief in-country training program that contained some guidance on the local population.<sup>341</sup> Given the conduct of American members at My Lai it would appear that this attempt to encourage the creation of a more culturally astute force was either ineffective from the onset or rapidly undermined by the experiences of soldiers when out in the field of combat.

Without adequate preparation, the clash between American culture and Vietnamese society was a shock for virtually all of the Americans sent to serve in Vietnam. Soldiers denigrated Vietnamese society, intuitively placing it in a lower state of existence than their own. Youthful exuberance combined with supreme confidence and physical prowess to produce an innate sense of superiority over a physically diminutive population. One soldier recalled the feeling of power that simply being amongst the people produced: 'You walking through the village and you got your great big old flak jacket on. You got your helmet and bandoliers all over you. You got your rifle. You tower over most of these people.'<sup>342</sup> This was one part of the racialisation of the Vietnamese as a people and of the war as a whole; a process which facilitated the gradual lowering, and in some cases removal, of natural barriers against atrocity within a human.

Inserting a racial component into war against an Oriental enemy was not new in the history of American warfare by the time Vietnam erupted. In three notable twentieth century campaigns, the United States military had adopted a racial element to its conduct. The counterinsurgency in the Philippines, countering the Japanese in World

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<sup>341</sup> 'Interview with Gary Franklin', (15/4/2010).

<sup>342</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 137.

War II, and fighting on the Korean Peninsula had all been characterised by the adoption of a distinctly racial agenda. Paul Kramer, in his lucid and comprehensive study on the impact of race on the United States' imperial actions in the Philippines, argued that racialising the native population during that particular conflict was an integral part of U.S. troops' 'popular culture' and was 'capable of defining a wartime enemy and organizing and motivating violence against it.'<sup>343</sup> In Vietnam a remarkably similar process occurred.

Nations at war have frequently adopted caricature as a means of fomenting sustained aggression towards their enemies,<sup>344</sup> but racialisation in the Philippines, the Pacific theatre in World War II, and Vietnam was notable for the incorporation of civilians into the process. Since civilians were highly visible in these conflicts, American soldiers gradually subsumed the entire population – combatant and non-combatant – into their prejudicial, racially orientated outlook. It was manifested, and sustained, most notably in the adoption of crude racial slurs. This was not unique to Vietnam, and in the case of American troops serving there was a progression from the attitudes and language of their predecessors who served in the Philippines, Korea and the Pacific Theatre. Indeed 'gook', the most common racial epithet used by soldiers in Vietnam, may have originated during the counterinsurgency in the Philippines.<sup>345</sup> It certainly had a link with the Korean War, in which the term 'han-guk' was the native term for a Korean person.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Kramer, *The Blood of Government*, p. 124.

<sup>344</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 361.

<sup>345</sup> Kramer, *Blood of Government*, p. 127.

<sup>346</sup> Col. David H. Hackworth and Julia Sherman, *About Face* (London, Pan Books, 1991), p. 49.

Applying racially charged derogatory labels to enemy soldiers reduced a soldier's personal, mental opposition to killing a fellow human. It created a distance between soldier and opponent, and as Lt. Col. David Hackworth recalled from his time in Korea it helped him to justify his actions: 'I felt no guilt – few of us did; I'd been trained too well, and besides, the enemy had been utterly dehumanized throughout my training. They aren't men, they're just gooks.'<sup>347</sup> In Vietnam, the enemy were just gooks too. 'There were gooks on the wire that night' recalled one veteran,<sup>348</sup> whilst another talked of 'the first gook' refusing to talk during one interrogation he witnessed.<sup>349</sup> One officer even tried to explain the linguistic variables of the various slurs to Michael Herr, who recalled,

'A bird colonel, commanding a brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division: "I'll bet you always wondered why we call 'em Dinks up in this part of the country. I thought of it myself. I'll tell you, I never did like hearing them called Charlie. See, I had an uncle named Charlie, and I liked him too. No, Charlie was just too damn good for the little bastards. So I just thought, What are they really like? and I came up with rinky-dink. Suits 'em just perfect, Rinky-Dink. 'Cept that was too long, so we cut it down some. And what's why we call em Dinks.'"<sup>350</sup>

Critically, however, racialisation was not confined to enemy forces. Villagers were incorporated into the crude stereotype of a subhuman, animalistic population. James

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<sup>347</sup> Hackworth and Sherman, *About Face*, p. 49.

<sup>348</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 49.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>350</sup> Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London, Pan Books, 1978), p. 145.



Dabanka, a member of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry in the Mekong Delta, was so disgusted by the Vietnamese who all ‘live like pigs’ that he confessed ‘I can’t see how people can live like this.’<sup>351</sup> Paul Kelly regarded the population in a similar vein, and in one letter home noted the Vietnamese were ‘just like animals.’<sup>352</sup>

This tendency to regard the Vietnamese as animals helped to facilitate an even more destructive dynamic, one which explicitly linked inferiority, pleasure and killing. It soon became apparent that a great many American troops in Vietnam regarded the combat as akin to hunting, and likened the experience to that enjoyed back home in fields and woodland whilst pursuing animal foe. James Simmen, a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant in the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, marvelled at ‘how similar killing is to hunting’ and that it was just like shooting deer.<sup>353</sup> Another veteran recalled how one combat operation became ‘a turkey shoot’.<sup>354</sup> Shooting and killing therefore became a game to many troops; ‘there was nothing to it’ recalled one veteran when discussing the emotional impact of killing a ‘gook’.<sup>355</sup>

Just as in the overt racialising of the Vietnamese, animalistic descriptions and allusions to hunting were by no means unique in the annals of American warfare in the Orient. Throughout the brutal fighting against Japanese forces in the Pacific during World War II it was common for combat to be simplified to the level of a

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<sup>351</sup> Edelman (ed.), *Dear America*, p. 54.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>354</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 105.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

hunt against a subhuman population.<sup>356</sup> Thus, American soldiers in Vietnam were part of a larger historical trend. The tendency for American troops to employ racialisation in their interaction with Oriental peoples was well-established even before Vietnam.

Soldiers recalled that racialisation was prevalent throughout much of the Army in Vietnam.<sup>357</sup> The fact that it was not uncommon in previous American military interventions perhaps explained why it spread so rapidly throughout the institution in that war. It was the casualness of the dehumanisation that made it all the more effective at destroying the barriers against inhuman behaviour. The nonchalant use of derogatory, demeaning language in relation to the Vietnamese was self-perpetuating, and reinforced an attitude of ambivalence, even hate, towards civilians.

In the Philippines, the attitude of American forces had been rooted in the battlefield environment, rather than solely through an imported sense of superiority.<sup>358</sup> So too was a great deal of the animosity towards the Vietnamese a result of the way the American forces felt they were being treated by the native population. This was not merely in the context of their daily contact with the Vietnamese people, but also in the way the Viet Cong conducted their war. Americans felt angry at the perceived hypocrisy of many civilians, and though some were respectful of their enemy,

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<sup>356</sup> John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, Pantheon, 1986), p. 90.

<sup>357</sup> 'Interview with Patrick Curry', 15 July 2005, Patrick Curry Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, (15/4/2010).

<sup>358</sup> Kramer, *Blood of Government*, p. 127.

nevertheless bemoaned the fact that communist forces were not exposing themselves to the Army's conventional firepower.<sup>359</sup>

For those troops not engaging uniformed, massed NVA units, the guerrilla nature of the warfare was one of the most important factors in facilitating a breakdown in the relationship between civilians and soldiers. American forces observed, time and time again, a seeming duplicity on the part of the Vietnamese. Villagers would endanger U.S. troops either through passive unwillingness to notify Americans of danger, or through active combat. Supply bases and command posts were often just as unsafe as actual combat zones. Frequently the targets of sapper attacks, these bases functioned thanks to the labour of Vietnamese civilians in the region, yet these very same Vietnamese would often participate in attacks against the posts. Rocket attacks could be guided using information from Vietnamese civilians inside the perimeter.<sup>360</sup> One soldier remembered his barber, a man who had been 'shaving you with a straight razor for the last two months', being shot dead in an attack on a compound.<sup>361</sup> Hairdressers, it seemed, were particularly prone to living a double life. David Taylor also recalled an enemy sapper killed during an attack against a base as being one of the barbers on the post.<sup>362</sup> Local craftsmen in the Chu Lai area made hand-made, booby-trapped cigarette lighters which were then sold at the Post Exchange shop on the local base to American troops.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Edelman (ed.), *Dear America*, p. 181.

<sup>360</sup> 'Interview with David W. Taylor', (16/4/2010).

<sup>361</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 72.

<sup>362</sup> 'Interview with David W. Taylor', (16/4/2010).

<sup>363</sup> 'Interview with Gary Franklin', (15/4/2010).

Outside of American bases, on search and destroy operations in the field, civilians also posed a lethal danger to U.S. troops. There was an element of unpredictability to much of the Vietnamese countryside, and soldiers recalled how wary they were of moving through villages when on operations. Ambivalence towards the safety of American soldiers angered many of these troops, and the sense of passivity on the part of civilians was particularly noticeable in their tendency to avoid notifying American troops of local threats. Timothy Vail recalled how ‘none of us were too happy to have a Bouncing Betty (mine) that close to a village. That meant that the villagers knew about it and didn’t say anything.’<sup>364</sup> David Taylor also felt that villagers hid information from American troops regarding the placement of mines and traps, but as with many of the more professional, pragmatic members of the U.S. Army, he had sympathy for civilians who not only had to deal with American forces, but also the Viet Cong who would demand loyalty from them.<sup>365</sup>

The reality of the situation, according to Vail, was that ‘you could look into a hut, a hooch, see some people there, they might smile at you, give them a candy bar and keep going, and then they might shoot you in the back.’<sup>366</sup> Another soldier, writing home in 1968, remarked caustically that ‘more than once we have captured or killed people with weapons whom we recognized as one of those smiling faces we had picked up and released earlier.’ To him and his unit it was ‘maddening because we know damn well that they’re dinks’.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> ‘Interview with Timothy Vail’, (15/4/2010).

<sup>365</sup> ‘Interview with David W. Taylor’, (16/4/2010).

<sup>366</sup> ‘Interview with Timothy Vail’, (15/4/2010).

<sup>367</sup> Edelman, *Dear America*, p. 48.

For many, 'it got to a point where you just didn't trust none of them.'<sup>368</sup> For some soldiers the only way to deal with this scenario was to adopt a sense of self-preservation; a behaviour that circumvented any rational limitations on their behaviour. One veteran argued, 'You can't tell who's your enemy. You got to shoot kids, you got to shoot women. You don't want to. You may be sorry you did. But you might be sorrier if you didn't. That's the damn truth.'<sup>369</sup> Without trust, there could be no empathy in the relationship between American troops and Vietnamese civilians. Without any empathy, the emotional response on the part of American soldiers interacting with the Vietnamese was often based around anger and fear. Antoine Roy, after one incident in which a trap was found near a self-declared friendly village, recalled 'turning around and looking at that sign back there and saying, you bastards.'<sup>370</sup> Another soldier, writing home at the time of his deployment with the Americal Division, 'felt like turning my machine guns on the village to kill every man, woman and child in it' after these civilians had sold drinks to soldiers at one point, and had then informed the VC on American movements moments later.<sup>371</sup> Soldiers struggled to comprehend the fact that civilians were often forced into dangerous roles as assistants for the enemy, perhaps an indication of the unsuitability of applying the military's unyielding sense of loyalty to civilians seeking to remain alive in bitterly contested areas.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 138.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151.

<sup>370</sup> 'Interview with Antoine Roy', (15/4/2010).

<sup>371</sup> Edelman, *Dear America*, p. 181.

<sup>372</sup> 'Interview with Bill Paris', (15/4/2010).

The response to losing a comrade when on patrol in these villages was often one of the most important in determining soldiers' actions against civilians. In cases of brutal attacks on civilians, a common factor was grief and anger at losing a fellow soldier. The notion of 'brothers-in-arms' was never more true than in Vietnam, where the isolated, unpredictable nature of combat made units emotionally close. The only way to survive was to depend on your fellow soldiers, and a huge interdependence was created between troops.<sup>373</sup> Members of the same unit were 'like brothers', and the loss of even one was an emotional impact that hurt men deeply.<sup>374</sup> Taylor put it mildly when he stated that soldiers 'were chagrined' about men being lost, or injured by traps and mines, yet there was no enemy to fight back against.<sup>375</sup>

Thus, the emotional response to losing a friend and comrade was directed against those that were the most visible representatives of an unseen enemy. Since civilians, as we have seen, had already been subsumed with genuine enemy combatants through crude, aesthetic racialising, they were the most likely to be on the receiving end of a soldier's anger. Russ Palm, after losing a friend to hostile fire, 'dumped sixty rounds in a man that was a thousand yards away. I lost it big time.'<sup>376</sup> In the case of My Lai, the loss of Sergeant George Cox, who was a popular member of the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, created a surge of anger towards local villagers who had failed to tell troops of mines in the region. The unit attended Cox's memorial on the day of their

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<sup>373</sup> 'Interview with Gary L. Noller', (16/4/2010).

<sup>374</sup> 'Interview with Timothy Vail', (15/4/2010).

<sup>375</sup> 'Interview with David W. Taylor', (16/4/2010).

<sup>376</sup> 'Interview with Russell C. Palm', (15/4/2010).

pre-operational briefing.<sup>377</sup> The actions of soldiers at My Lai a short time later reflected a pent up desire to offer recrimination for the loss of Cox.

Such a reaction was not necessarily entirely independent of the American military as an institution. Dr. Jonathan Shay, in his fascinating comparative discussion of the *Iliad* and the Vietnam War, noted that several veterans he had worked with in his research into combat grief recalled their superiors exhorting them, 'don't get sad. Get even!'<sup>378</sup> At My Lai, officers demonstrated a similar willingness to harness emotional impulses as a combat determinant. Though arguments continue to rage over the exact nature of the pre-My Lai briefing, there is little contention that senior officers made an impression on their men in urging them to pick up their aggression and to revenge themselves on targets in the village.<sup>379</sup>

Getting even, however, was not necessarily about killing civilians out of hand. The fact that civilians were regarded as expendable was in large part down to the acceptability and prevalence of petty, niggling examples of disregard for Vietnamese life and culture. A soldier sank a Vietnamese sampan boat with a rock, just for fun.<sup>380</sup> Another soldier simply made a bet that he would run down an old Vietnamese woman on the road, and in doing so, broke her hip.<sup>381</sup> This behaviour was accepted as normal in an environment in which the Vietnamese were regarded as racially,

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<sup>377</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 97.

<sup>378</sup> Jonathon Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 81.

<sup>379</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 101.

<sup>380</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 136.

<sup>381</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 138.

materially and culturally inferior. These actions, unpunished in the anonymity of Vietnam, had a powerful impact on the behaviour of young American soldiers. They saw that they could get away with small examples of naked aggression towards the Vietnamese. At such a youthful age, 'one of the most malleable and vulnerable stages of their lives',<sup>382</sup> these boys were given the chance to act without any real oversight. Their youth made them highly susceptible to the bad habits, and the poor behaviour, that developed in Vietnam. For Grossman, it amounted to 'a real-world enactment of *The Lord of the Flies* with guns, and (was) destined to internalise the horrors of combat during one of the most vulnerable and susceptible stages of life.'<sup>383</sup>

The horrors of war were not only linked to the loss of comrades. Interacting with civilians forced many American soldiers to make decisions which in normal society were unimaginable. One veteran despaired that 'they trained me to kill. They sent me to Vietnam. They didn't tell me that I'd be fighting kids.'<sup>384</sup> Soldiers had to come to terms with the fact that the enemy they were fighting was not simply made up of fighting-age males, attired in distinctive combat uniforms, and placed in traditional military formations and fighting positions. Child combatants were a part of life in Vietnam. Sapper attacks on U.S. firebases and base camps often involved the use of children as a sacrificial element of the assault – taken from local villages and deployed as a way of using up American defensive fire.<sup>385</sup> Even when out in the

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<sup>382</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 266.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>385</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 99.



villages, patrolling rather than engaging enemy forces, children were a hazard. Bill Paris recalled that only strong leadership and personal decisiveness avoided tragedy when a child threw a grenade at troops moving through a village. For Paris, the moment was the

‘defining line between how you’re going to handle something and it can go either way. Then the captain started hollering, “Don’t shoot.” You know. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot, don’t shoot.” This little kid is standing there he is probably nine years old, eight years old, just looking at us because you know somebody gave him this and said, “Here go throw it at the Americans and do this.” He didn’t really know. If he did, so what? He was still a young kid.’<sup>386</sup>

Incidents like this cast serious doubt in the minds of American soldiers. It summed up the horror of Vietnam, and many American soldiers often struggled to adequately cope and perform professionally as a result. Gary Noller, who served in the Americal Division after being drafted in 1969, was eloquent in his summation of just how these agencies could determine the likelihood of atrocity in Vietnam. Soldiers, he thought, ‘had their low points. How they coped with low points could vary and I think in fact a lot of times the way people coped with their low points is they took it out on the enemy or they took it out on civilians.’<sup>387</sup>

A decade later, in El Salvador, Woerner declared that he ‘was unable to come to a personal evaluation of the degree of support the military enjoys from the civilian populous. However, having heard so often the Armed Forces’ thesis of its good

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<sup>386</sup> ‘Interview with Bill Paris’, (15/4/2010).

<sup>387</sup> ‘Interview with Gary L. Noller’, (16/4/2010).

relations, I am tempted to give it some credibility.<sup>388</sup> Reflecting the naive approach to the conflict that characterised much of the United States' policy in El Salvador, Woerner completely misunderstood the interaction between civilians and ESAF. Perhaps the General believed the civil nature of the war, and the socio-economic composition of ESAF, meant soldiers fighting avowedly leftist guerrillas would naturally have the support of the civilian portion of society. Enlisted soldiers in ESAF were often simply picked up off the streets of their communities, and as such came from the same social and economic circles as their victims.<sup>389</sup> Neither the tiny wealthy minority, nor the small middle-class, sent their own sons to war as soldiers.<sup>390</sup> Even the junior officers had little reason to regard themselves as being substantially better than the *campesinos* and villagers they led operations against – they had more in common with these members of Salvadoran society than the oligarchs who, as Bosch stated, rarely opened the doors of their elite country clubs to even the most 'European'-featured officers.<sup>391</sup> Woerner might have dismissed civilian-ESAF friction because of this apparent lack of socio-economic friction between soldiers and civilians.

In reality, however, there was a turbulent relationship between civilians and ESAF. It was largely based upon a similar sense of superiority within the military that had been common in Vietnam. Historical and cultural dynamics had forged a Salvadoran military that believed in its own self-importance and sense of supremacy. For

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<sup>388</sup> *Woerner Report*, p. 207.

<sup>389</sup> *New York Times*, 24 July 1983.

<sup>390</sup> *New York Times*, 24 July 1983.

<sup>391</sup> Bosch, *Salvadoran Officer Corps*, p. 13.

decades, even centuries, a clear distinction between soldiers and civilians had been nurtured in the country. Ever since the Spanish monarchs' decision to implement the policy of *fuero militar* during the era of the *conquistadores*, the military of El Salvador – and those of other Latin American nations – had regarded themselves as a separate class to the civilians of the country.<sup>392</sup> By the time the *Matanza* occurred in 1932, the Salvadoran military was already imbued with a distinct sense of class superiority. The *Matanza* served only to heighten such an attitude, reinforcing the traditional dichotomy between the *campesino* labouring class of society and the military. Anderson is of little doubt that the peasant revolt and subsequent government repression were absolutely fundamental in escalating the tensions between poor and wealthy in El Salvador. With the military maintaining silence over the matter throughout the twentieth century, myth and legend had developed until there was a sense amongst the conservative element of the country that a heroic army had held back the crashing waves of the murderous Indian rebels who had allied themselves with the cause of International Communism.<sup>393</sup>

The *Matanza*'s impact on the way in which the military and conservatives viewed the poor of the country should not be underestimated. Anderson regards the events of January 1932 as changing the entire nature of El Salvador as a country. In his view, 'the age of ideologies had come to Latin America.'<sup>394</sup> By introducing the destructive rhetoric of strident anti-communism to the existing class-based dynamic in the country, the *Matanza* had further polarised the relationship between civilians and

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<sup>392</sup> Millet, 'The Central America Militaries', p. 205.

<sup>393</sup> Anderson, *Matanza*, p. 159.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

armed forces. Even more so now, soldiers regarded civilians with contempt and hatred, particularly the *campesino* sector of society. There was an ‘almost paranoiac’ fear of leftists and communists following the *Matanza*, fuelled greatly by the hysterical yet persistent belief that the rebellious Indians had butchered hundreds of bourgeoisie.<sup>395</sup>

This paranoia continued throughout the twentieth century, but was made geopolitically acceptable by the international fight against communism that developed in the aftermath of World War II, and escalated during the Cold War. No longer was the repression of *campesinos* and leftist reformists in general to be regarded solely through a Salvadoran prism. Instead, a succession of American administrations in the post-war period placed the policy of anti-communism at the forefront of United States foreign policy, and tied El Salvador into this process.

The result of such importance being placed on anti-communism was an isolation and ostracism of those in El Salvador who did not conform to the status quo espoused by the authoritarian, repressive but crucially non-communist, military government. When the civil war erupted, and Reagan entered the White House, it was made clear that the defeat of communism was the primary motivation for U.S. activity in the country.<sup>396</sup> Conservative elements of Salvadoran society had the materiel, and now the full ideological support, of the United States. Political heavyweights, emboldened by the support of Reagan and his conservative brethren, ramped up the incendiary oratory and spurred on the military. Roberto D’Aubuisson, after taking up

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<sup>395</sup> Anderson, *Matanza*, p. 158.

<sup>396</sup> Interview with Ambassador Deane Hinton, *El Salvador at War*, p. 111.

the mantle of 'respectable' politician, vowed to 'exterminate' opposition, and represented a party whose members were willing to sanction, amongst other things, the use of napalm and the slaughter of civilians as a tolerable, legitimate means of winning the war.<sup>397</sup>

Consequently, when the simmering insurgency flourished in 1980 and civil war broke out, an 'ideological overcharge' had already been constructed within El Salvador.<sup>398</sup> Those who had been a thorn in the side of the military and its oligarchic masters during the twentieth-century, and even before this period, were now subjected to this 'overcharge'. Not only were they regarded as a threat to the status quo based on historical precedent, but they were now a dangerous element within the context of world-wide anti-communism. Those who resisted the non-communist system were not viewed as legitimate opposition, but as 'terrorists' and 'subversives'. When civil war erupted, ESAF members refused to define their enemy as legitimate combatants. Instead, they were terrorists, intent only on subverting the economy and destroying the wealth of the country.<sup>399</sup> An indication of just how prevalent the categorisation was, and just how polarised the nation as a whole was, is clear in the fact that even American advisors found themselves identifying potential guerrilla adversaries as 'terrorists'.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> *New York Times*, 19 February 1982.

<sup>398</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 42.

<sup>399</sup> Interview with Colonel Orlando Zepeda, *El Salvador at War*, p. 156.

<sup>400</sup> *Washington Post*, 7 June 1981.

The ubiquity of this categorisation extended to the non-combatant portion of Salvadoran society too. The term *masas*, denoting those civilians who support guerrilla units, was applied in a blanket manner to entire areas of El Salvador that had a notable guerrilla presence. Since terrorists were legitimate targets, so too were supporters of terrorism. At El Mozote, soldiers were heard to remark to their victims that ‘all you sons of bitches are collaborators’ and that ‘you’re going to have to pay for those bastards.’<sup>401</sup> In July 1984, the area surrounding the village of Los Llanitos was targeted by an Army sweep. Utilising elements of the Atlacatl Battalion, the First Infantry Brigade, and the Fifth Military Detachment, the Army killed 68 civilians in an apparent reprisal assault for the area’s support of guerrilla forces, and its role as a staging area for a recent rebel assault on the Cerrón Grande dam. Major Ricardo Murcia, the Atlacatl’s executive officer, told journalists that ‘no peaceful life’ existed in the area, which was made up of a population comprising only ‘terrorists.’<sup>402</sup>

Civilians in the border regions of El Salvador suffered greatly from this tendency to link guerrilla attacks with civilian support. Colonel Carlos Reynaldo López Nuila, the Vice Minister of Public Security, stated bluntly that refugee camps were guerrilla sanctuaries, but that owing to an arrangement with Honduras, El Salvador’s military was able ‘to go into these areas and clean them up.’<sup>403</sup> A belief that refugees were part of the insurgency may explain the violence of the Sumpul and Lempa rivers, when ESAF engaged large groups of displaced civilians attempting to flee into

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<sup>401</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 63.

<sup>402</sup> *New York Times*, 9 September 1984.

<sup>403</sup> Interview with Colonel Carlos Reynaldo López Nuila, *El Salvador at War*, p. 162.

Honduras. If so, this was a similar sentiment to that expressed by American forces during the Philippine insurrection, in which the stubborn presence of guerrilla forces was put down to the entire population's complicity in the insurrection.<sup>404</sup> The sustained ability of FMLN units to conduct operations in particular areas of El Salvador was, like the Philippines and Vietnam, put down to civilian culpability.

Like Vietnam, soldiers' suspicions of entire communities increased their willingness to target civilians. Children and women paid a heavy price for this sentiment, as soldiers regarded them as being inherently dangerous. At El Mozote, children and women were slaughtered alongside their male family members and neighbours. One member of the Atlacatl Battalion was overheard justifying this because if they didn't 'kill them (children) now, they'll just grow up to be guerrillas. We have to take care of the job now.'<sup>405</sup> Those who didn't kill out of a sense of future self-preservation were overheard to remark that the children were guerrillas at that moment, and killing them was justice.<sup>406</sup>

Women were also targeted by ESAF soldiers. It may have been that the presence of women in FMLN units provided soldiers with a greater plausibility in employing violence against the female section of civilian society. It has been estimated that in the 1970s and 1980s one third of all of the FMLN's guerrillas were women.<sup>407</sup> It could be that the rape and murder of women at El Mozote was seen by the

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<sup>404</sup> Kramer, *Blood of Government*, p. 138.

<sup>405</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 75.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>407</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas & Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 215.

perpetrators as a reprisal for the willingness of others of the same sex to serve in the guerrilla forces. More likely, however, is the fact that the horrific violence directed at women and young girls in particular was a result of the simple fact that an all-male combat force was placed into an environment in which females were defenceless. Soldiers, without any regular outlet for their pent-up sexual desires, had ample opportunity to take what they wanted by force in the field of combat. Strong leadership was vital in deterring this behaviour, but all too often it was lacking. David Taylor believed his willingness 'to just keep an eye on my men' helped stave off any improper behaviour from his unit.<sup>408</sup> Without leaders of Taylor's calibre, units could behave atrociously with women and girls they found on operations. One Vietnam veteran remembered his unit as being 'like an animal pack' when they raped and killed one particular young girl during a sweep operation.<sup>409</sup> At El Mozote, soldiers were heard to remark on the enjoyment they derived from raping the women and children in the village.<sup>410</sup> However, it is noticeable that incidents of rape tended to involve groups of soldiers, suggesting that peer pressure and the subsequent desire to conform was a powerful motivating factor. Indeed, studies of violence have increasingly concentrated on the notion of societal pressure over innate 'evilness'. Grossman argues persuasively that the close bond between soldiers can limit their willingness to oppose group actions.<sup>411</sup> Just as this emotional bond fostered an aggressive outpouring of anger upon a comrade's death, so too did it provoke

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<sup>408</sup> 'Interview with David W. Taylor', (16/4/2010).

<sup>409</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p 149.

<sup>410</sup> Danner, *El Mozote*, p. 71.

<sup>411</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, p. 224.



toleration for, and indeed willingness of, atrocious action in individuals when partaking as part of a larger group.

A sense of conformity and personal desires, based frequently around a thirst for self-gratification and self-gain, created an environment in which revenge was sometimes a source of violence employed against civilians. In one example, which occurred in July 1981 following an altercation with a football team at an Army checkpoint, at least 19 people were taken from their homes in the community of Armenia and murdered by troops conducting a door-to-door search operation. Shortly afterwards, the football team was deleted from the local league's register.<sup>412</sup>

One Vietnam veteran later admitted that 'too many of us forgot that Vietnamese were people. We didn't treat them like people after a while.'<sup>413</sup> The murder of Vietnamese and Salvadoran civilians was the ultimate expression of this belief. In denying the humanity of civilians, soldiers moved through the final barrier against atrocity. Parallels between the two conflicts abound when examining how soldiers viewed civilians. Each war was marred by historical and cultural processes which had a deep influence on soldiers. Whilst a racialisation of the Vietnamese provided a justification for the actions of American soldiers, in El Salvador it was the historical schism between the elite armed forces and the poor working class *campesino* population which fostered toleration for brutality. Civilians in both wars were regarded with deep suspicion. Soldiers felt civilians were hypocritical or had direct links with the enemy. Without effective judicial deterrence, professional leadership

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<sup>412</sup> *Washington Post*, 18 August 1981.

<sup>413</sup> Baker, *Nam*, p. 135.

and a more productive form of military strategy, soldiers turned suspicion into hatred, and hatred into murder.

## Conclusion

‘Warfare prosecuted according to recognized laws of war has been the exception not the rule.’<sup>414</sup> - George Kassimeris.

In the opening months of 1982, officials in the Reagan administration steadfastly denied an atrocity had occurred at El Mozote during the previous December. Thomas Enders, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, testified to Congress that reports of the incident were exaggerated, and that there was no evidence to suggest the Salvadoran armed forces had committed systematic murder.<sup>415</sup> Ronald Reagan’s administration had vowed to ‘draw the line’ in El Salvador against global communist aggression.<sup>416</sup> Drawing the line cost thousands of innocent lives.<sup>417</sup> In 1994, Mark Danner published *The Massacre at El Mozote*. The work described the events of December 1981 in El Mozote, narrating how in this one incident alone, members of ESAF killed 767 men, women and children during an anti-guerrilla sweep in the region.

A decade earlier the United States had evacuated its last combat forces from Vietnam. In 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower had demanded action to halt communist expansion in South East Asia, memorably comparing the situation to

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<sup>414</sup> George Kassimeris, ‘The Warrior’s Dishonour’ in George Kassimeris (ed.) *Warrior’s Dishonour: Barbarity, Morality and Torture in Modern Warfare* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>415</sup> *New York Times*, 2 February 1982.

<sup>416</sup> *Washington Post*, 20 February 1981.

<sup>417</sup> *U.N. Truth Commission*, p. 10.

falling dominoes.<sup>418</sup> The United States proved unable to prop up the Vietnamese domino, and it fell in 1975. The war that had raged in Vietnam cost, according to some estimates, the lives of two million civilians.<sup>419</sup> Nearly five hundred of these deaths occurred in the small community of My Lai when, on 16 March 1968, soldiers from the U.S. Army swept through the area. Incidents of civilian deaths by U.S. forces weren't limited to the My Lai tragedy, and post-war investigations into war crimes revealed more occurred during Vietnam than had previously been thought.<sup>420</sup>

The actions of soldiers during Vietnam and El Salvador's civil war demonstrated that Kassimeris' sad indictment of modern warfare was particularly apt for these conflicts. War, as Guenter Lewy argued, can bring out the best in men; it can, as he added, also lead to the worst of human nature.<sup>421</sup> In Vietnam and El Salvador, at My Lai and at El Mozote, soldiers participated in behaviour that demonstrated the worst of human nature. Their brutality defies simplistic evaluation. It is unacceptable to dismiss them as simply 'evil'. Instead, understanding such violence requires the deeper contextualisation that Aldo Lauria-Santiago demanded.<sup>422</sup> It has been the intention of this study to provide such an understanding.

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<sup>418</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, 8 April 1954.

<sup>419</sup> '20 Years after Victory', <<http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/232/2322414020.pdf>> (23/09/2010).

<sup>420</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 2006.

<sup>421</sup> Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 307.

<sup>422</sup> Lauria-Santiago, 'Culture and Politics', p. 106.

The soldiers who murdered civilians in Vietnam and El Salvador were a product of a path to atrocity; a path that shaped their behaviour from the moment they entered the military to the moment they descended into brutality. Their training was the initial stage along this path. During their instruction in the ways of the military, soldiers experienced a world that taught them an aptitude for killing. They were educated in the weapons and tactics required to defeat conventional enemy units. Firepower was stressed as the solution to the insurgencies in Vietnam and El Salvador. Training demanded conformity to this ethos.<sup>423</sup> Instructors diminished independence of thought in favour of extolling the effectiveness of quick reaction.<sup>424</sup> Human rights instruction was insufficient to curb this emphasis on convention. In both conflicts, soldiers were ineffectively taught about the rules of warfare.

Once thrust onto the field of combat in Vietnam and El Salvador, soldiers found themselves applying their training to a situation entirely unsuited to convention. Operations relegated the safety of the civilian population to a secondary objective behind the destruction of enemy combatants. Counterinsurgency programs like the Marine Corps' CAP system were rejected. Weapons systems that were unsuitable for counterinsurgency were employed as part of the conventional drive by the U.S. Army and ESAF. Statistics and ratios removed the human interaction required for counterinsurgency.

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<sup>423</sup> 'Interview with Gary L. Noller', (16/4/2010).

<sup>424</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 40.

Command deficiencies were crucial in fostering an environment in which soldiers could commit atrocity. There was good leadership, particularly in Vietnam.<sup>425</sup> However, such leaders were the exception, and the U.S. forces there suffered from a very poor command element.<sup>426</sup> Those who committed atrocities suffered under such unprofessional leadership. Specific officers allowed indiscipline and brutal behaviour to occur.<sup>427</sup> In El Salvador, strong, sustained links – ideological and fiscal – between conservatives and the officer corps corrupted the professionalism of the military and resulted in the shocking ability of hard-line oligarchs to influence the direction and targets of military campaigns.

The final stage in the path to atrocity was the ultimate breakdown in the relationship between soldiers and the population they were sent to defend. In Vietnam and El Salvador, the relationship between the two was marked by mistrust, anger and hatred. In interacting with civilians, soldiers were influenced by processes both large and small. Individual and group experiences contributed enormously to a soldier's ability to identify, and empathise, with civilians. Tragic incidents, like the loss of a comrade, provoked emotional responses in troops that were directed at civilians. On a larger scale, racial and geo-political processes put immense pressure on soldiers to conform to accepted notions of behaviour with civilians. Racialisation proved a destructive agency in Vietnam, just as it had in the Philippines, Korea and the Pacific Theatre in World War II. In El Salvador, anti-communism of the most rabid form was compounded by the long history of social and economic subjugation of the rural

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<sup>425</sup> 'Interview with Gary L. Noller', (16/4/2010).

<sup>426</sup> Cincinnatus, *Self Destruction*, p. 22.

<sup>427</sup> Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, p. 76.

and poor sector of Salvadoran society. Soldiers tied their own terrible personal experiences into this wider narrative of intolerance, and civilians paid the price.

This path to atrocity in Vietnam and El Salvador was not isolated from the larger trends of history that occurred in the period. Rather, examining war crimes and their perpetrators during these two conflicts shows how the limitations of American military doctrine and foreign policy strategy were evident in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the intervening period. This study has shown that the fundamental weakness in U.S. policy during this period was a dependence on a conventional approach to defeating insurgencies. Counterinsurgency demands a political solution.<sup>428</sup> In Vietnam and El Salvador, regular military force was applied. The effect of such an unsuitable policy was to diminish the importance of the population, relegating human rights to a secondary concern behind the destruction of guerrilla units. In Vietnam, American units failed to learn from experiences in fighting insurgencies. Despite having experience of guerrilla combat in the French and Indian Wars in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the War of Independence, the Civil War and the Philippines conflict, the U.S. military failed to apply such experience in Vietnam.<sup>429</sup> Pacification programs occurred too late and without sufficient emphasis.<sup>430</sup>

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the U.S. military maintained a reliance on conventionality. Marginalising important studies into the failures of Vietnam, the military took to heart those analyses that affirmed its conventional doctrine was the

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<sup>428</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. 5.

<sup>429</sup> Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction*, p. 35.

<sup>430</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat*, p. 166.

correct one. Generals William E. DePuy and Donn A. Starry applied the lessons of the 1973 Yom Kippur War in order to justify their decision to diminish the importance of counterinsurgency and emphasise conventional weapons and strategies.<sup>431</sup> Colonel Harry Summers argued in his 1982 work, *On Strategy*, that the U.S. would have won in Vietnam had American forces been allowed by their political masters to invade North Vietnam in the aftermath of the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965.<sup>432</sup> The book was widely read in the military and received great support.<sup>433</sup> Thus, when the U.S. military came to increase its support of the Salvadoran armed forces in the latter stages of the 1970s, it did so from an unsuitable doctrinal position. This belief that conventionality could defeat insurgencies filtered into ESAF, and affirmed their own propensity to use indiscriminate, massed firepower to counter its foes. American weapons systems and training programs continuously reinforced this devotion to regular warfare from ESAF. Nagl argued that conventional forces focus on 'kinetic' offensive actions instead of supporting the political, economic and social reforms necessary for counterinsurgency.<sup>434</sup> The inability of the U.S. to recognise this failing of conventional force increased the propensity for atrocity in Vietnam and El Salvador.

However, this study has also shown that accusations of direct American complicity for atrocities in El Salvador are often overstated. Central America held a great

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<sup>431</sup> Bronfeld, 'Fighting Outnumbered', p. 468.

<sup>432</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 87.

<sup>433</sup> Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, p. 33.

<sup>434</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. viii.



interest for the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>435</sup> El Salvador was particularly important, and the actions of the Carter and Reagan administrations demonstrated a commitment to defeating the leftist insurgency there. However, their actions were diluted in impact because of two important reasons. Firstly, U.S. programs suffered from a fragmented command structure and often irreconcilable goals. American observers complained of a lack of unity in command in the country.<sup>436</sup> General Wallace Nutting, commanding officer SouthCom, complained of a 'total lack of coherence' from Washington.<sup>437</sup> This was compounded by differences in objectives. The embassy and military often bickered over the nature and extent of U.S. assistance, and it weakened the ability of the U.S. to influence El Salvador's armed forces.<sup>438</sup> ESAF needed a great deal of influence, given the direction it was taking in trying to defeat the insurgency. Moulded by a history of brutal repression, supported by wealthy oligarchs with a stake in maintaining the status quo, and commanded by a clique of nepotistic, conservative officers whose only loyalty was to the institution itself, ESAF stubbornly resisted American influence. Indeed, El Salvador's was probably the most successful military in Central America in resisting U.S. influence.<sup>439</sup> It was less successful in prosecuting the war against the FMLN and protecting Salvadorans from its own forces.

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<sup>435</sup> Abraham F. Lowenthal, *Partners in Conflict: The United States and Latin America* (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. ix.

<sup>436</sup> Interview with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador at War*, p. 240.

<sup>437</sup> Interview with General Wallace H. Nutting, *El Salvador at War*, p. 239.

<sup>438</sup> Interview with Colonel John Cash, *El Salvador at War*, p. 240.

<sup>439</sup> Millet, 'The Central American Militaries', p. 209.

The inability to protect civilians, be they Vietnamese or Salvadoran, was a hallmark of those two conflicts. There were soldiers who believed in honour and courage; men like Timothy Vail who believed that ‘to be able to look at my face in the mirror when I got home’ was far more important than a desire to please the Army.<sup>440</sup> The perpetrators of war crimes in Vietnam and El Salvador were not as strong, and were unable to resist the conditioning which had occurred throughout their career in the military. During their training, in the field of combat, under the supervision of their leaders, and in their interaction with civilians, soldiers were put under great pressure to ignore counterinsurgency policies and concentrate on a type of warfare that diminished the humanity of the population. Colman McCarthy saw in El Salvador that the people had been made the enemy.<sup>441</sup> When this occurred, the path to atrocity was complete.

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<sup>440</sup> ‘Interview with Timothy Vail’, (15/4/2010).

<sup>441</sup> *Washington Post*, 3 April 1980.

## Glossary

AIASA	Annual Integrated Assessment of Security Assistance for El Salvador
ANSESAL	Salvadoran National Special Services Agency
ARENA	National Republican Alliance
BIRI	Rapid Reaction Battalion
CAP	Combined Action Platoon
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam Central Intelligence Agency
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
ESAF	El Salvador's Armed Forces
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
FMS	Foreign Military Sales
IMET	International Military Education and Training
JAG	Judge Advocates General

LIC	Low Intensity Conflict
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MilGroup	United States Military Group
MTT	Military Training Team
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
ORDEN	Democratic Nationalist Organisation
SouthCom	United States Southern Command
USASOA	United States Army School of the Americas
VC	Viet Cong

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